

**Continuity and Change in the Landscape of God's Mission:
Holding on and Letting go**

Scott W. Sunquist

Kenyan democracy has failed because ordinary people were encouraged to believe that the process in and of itself could bring change.¹

Engraved on my business card is the name of a Christian martyr. I am Scott Sunquist and I am the W. Don McClure Associate Professor of World Mission and Evangelism at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. McClure and his wife Lyda were retired mission volunteers working in Ethiopia and Somalia. It seems that we have come to believe that Christian mission from the West no longer involves suffering. Rapid and economical communications have made Christian mission almost failsafe. And yet, Protestant missionary work was conceived in awakenings in North America and Europe, and then delivered into disease ridden jungles in Africa and Asia. The missionary calling was a call to die and so missionaries understood the memorable phrase, "I have been crucified with Christ." They also understood Paul when he said, "For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain (Phil. 1:21). The spirituality was closer to that of the early church, imitating Christ unto death. Today however mission is closer to tourism than martyrdom, it is more domesticated than dangerous. That's nice.

I put this up front, because I think we have forgotten that *Christian mission has always been a matter of participating in the suffering and glory of the Triune God*. It is not our safe and carefully planned work, it is dangerous, often imperfectly organized, it can be frightening and it is a work of the unbridled Holy Spirit of the Living God. Christian mission is a matter of spirituality more than structures, of sacrifice more than strategies. Any assumption that our task here is to restructure life into Presbyterian mission will fail, and it should. Our task is to participate with God, and plead with God that he would breathe new life into this old institution. We should begin by confessing that we have been trapped in small dreams, we have lost our way in swirling winds of culture, and we have been concerned to defend our little kingdoms, while the Kingdom of God is about ready to overwhelm us. It is true. As we restructure and restructure and reorganize, our little decreasing kingdom, the Kingdom of God is arising as a magnificent and glorious city of the poor and oppressed. Friends we are only a few drops in the Kingdom Bucket of God's mission. But don't be disheartened. A few drops of almond can change the flavor of the whole bucket. But, beware, a few drops of arsenic can change things too. I trust we can discern the difference.

Let me suggest some common ground for us, coming from the variety of cultures, mission structures and histories that we do. First, we all share in our commitment to the mission of the Triune God² as expressed through the PCUSA.³ We all love Jesus Christ and want to see his "Kingdom come on earth, as it is in heaven." None of us, I am sure believe that God's mission is only through the PCUSA, and therefore we are ecumenical and not cultic nor fundamentalists. Secondly, I would venture to guess that we all are here because we think that something needs to be fixed. For us, that something has to do with the missionary structures of

¹ Aiden Hartley, "Democracy by Other Means, *New York Times*, January 11, 2008.

² G 3.0103 "God's redeeming and reconciling activity in the world continues through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, who confronts individuals and societies with Christ's Lordship of life and calls them to repentance and obedience to the will of God."

³ G 10100b "Christ calls the church into being, giving it all that is necessary for its mission to the world."

the PCUSA. However, we come with different ideas of what it is that is wrong and what caused it. We all come with different prejudices and experiences of pain having been hurt, offended, frustrated or just “really disappointed” with how we have carried out God’s mission within the PCUSA. For some of us we have been hurt by Louisville, New York, Atlanta, Nashville, Philadelphia or Richmond. For others we have been offended by “those churches,” “those upstarts,” the validated mission structures, or even the mission professors. Come to think of it we are full of offenders and offendees here today. I’m not doing a good job with this common ground theme here. Bear with me.

Thirdly, we all share the common love of Christ for the world and we all weep when we think of the ongoing suffering in our world. We would all like to see rampant disease abate, a lowering of the poverty rate, and we all pray that violence would only be a bad memory. We all live with the terrible tension that the Kingdom is now and it is not yet fully revealed enough for us. We all have a holy impatience about God’s glory being revealed among the nations. We are hopeful activists for the Kingdom.

Fourthly, we all share the knowledge that while Christianity is growing in LAFRIASIA, it is declining by almost all measures in the North Atlantic world. We don’t like that, but we rationalize and explain it in different ways. With studied zeal and knit brow, we have come to acknowledge the obvious.

Fifthly, we all share the common knowledge that while our funding for mission through the General Assembly is declining, Presbyterians are involved in mission as much or more than ever. Fourth Presb. in Chicago is actively involved in mission. From their website: “Fourth Church mission trips scheduled for 2008, includes trips to Cameroon, Cuba, Guatemala, New Orleans, the Pine Ridge and Rosebud Reservations, a farm in Illinois, and an urban plunge in Chicago” Not to be outdone, First Presbyterian Church Orlando has 9 trips planned before the end of October, to 6 countries, plus another 5 trips sponsored by Compassion International to 5 other countries. Peachtree Presbyterian Church in Atlanta has partnerships or work of some sort with 20 different countries and about one mission trip planned every month; this is only the tip of the missional iceberg. So you see, we have a lot in common.

My responsibility is to identify what has changed, what remains the same and then to suggest “openings.” I will do my best. I do this as a “big picture guy,” having worked for the past 8 years on a global history of 2,000 years’ of Christianity, and now having finished editing with my daughter a book on Presbyterian mission since WW II. Taking a long view has its advantages. Long view people tend not to worry about the little things like money and church divisions. The big picture helps you to see the trends and movements of God and it tends to blur the infighting. Good historical study also gives us an anchor and a sail. As an anchor it ties us down to the Great Tradition of the church and reminds us that we are part of something that has a long tradition. It gives us a sail, by which it gives us freedom to do new things which are actually quite old. We can then let this wind of the Spirit blow the sails of forgotten tradition and ideas. I am amazed at how, for example, my church history students are thinking about a new monasticism, voluntary poverty and intentional missional communities because they studied the foundations and development of early monasticism: an anchor and sails. Here goes.

I. What has changed?

This is actually much easier than I thought. After looking at the long view of mission history and the history of world Christianity I have found out that most things have not changed. We might think that there are new dynamics, and new issues, but often what we think is new, is

just an old pattern reappearing. Let me give a few examples just taken from Presbyterian mission in the last few centuries.

A. What has not changed?

Conflicts over **funding** are older than the Board of Missions or any other mission agency of the Presbyterian Church even in the 19th century. There were discussions in the 1820s and 1830s over money from local churches that would be given to the Western Missionary Society (supporting regional work among First Nations Peoples) or going to the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, or going to the United Foreign Missionary Society, and then came the Western Foreign Missionary Society. The discussions were polite and discrete, but the issue seemed to be framed around a view of what I call “the financial pie:” there is only this much money, so who gets what depends upon how you slice it. Fortunately most of our Presbyterian ancestors did not believe in a financial pie; neither do I.

Conflicts over **what structure is best** are not new. In the 1820s and 1830s there were arguments over whether it was best to carry out mission through a non-denominational agency like the ABCFM, or through regional missions (Boston was a long way off from Erie, Pennsylvania), or through a national mission agency. And then came the new question. Was there room for another mission agency or society sponsored by the General Assembly? By the 1830s Presbyterians were already supporting the ABCFM (1812), New York Missionary Society (1796); the Northern Berkshire and Columbia Missionary Societies (1797); the Missionary Society of Connecticut (1798); the Massachusetts Missionary Society (1799); and the Boston Female Society for Missionary Purposes (1800), and of course the United Foreign Missionary Society, and the Western Missionary Society. Why start our own denominational agency? Others argued that we do need our own denominational agency. And still others argued we should have local agencies for each synod, not one society of the General Assembly. Thus there was diversity in mission society options and in views regarding which structure was best. For most of the 19th century we were blended mission, parallel to blended worship of today.

Conflicts over **how many mission agencies** we should have were related to what structure was best. Since we were cooperating with so many agencies and so many structures were in existence maybe we had too many. Remember, all of these societies had a cause: the Second Great Awakening produced new initiatives in mission and new churches being planted. Structures followed renewals, and this is always the case. The tap root of new initiatives is spiritual awakening. All of this work, all of these societies, and these discussions occurred before 1840. Later we started more than six women’s societies and cooperated with a number of other agencies including the various Bible Societies.⁴

Finally, **short term missions** is not a new thing, it is just much easier to do now. When the Synod of Pittsburgh was established in 1802 it established the Western Missionary Society as part of its Synod and began sending local pastors on short term mission to regional First Nations villages. Some churches were established, some schools were started, and most of these mission trips lasted from one to two months. There is one final concept or concern that has not changed.

B. The local church is missionary: our heritage.

These above issues which today seem so pressing, are not new. There are many more, but before we move on, I want to emphasize one concept which we, as Presbyterians must remember is not new: it is in our genetic make-up. *The local church is missionary.* J. Lesslie Newbigin

⁴ Edwin Munsell Bliss’ 1891 *Encyclopedia of Missions, Descriptive, Historical, Biographical, Statistical...* (NY: Funk and Wagnalls) lists over ten Women’s Presbyterian Societies under his entry, “Women’s Work for Woman.”

expressed it very well after the 1961 New Delhi WCC Assembly where the IMC was integrated into the WCC.

“The truth that the Church is itself something sent into the world, the continuing of Christ’s mission from the Father, something which is not so much an institution as an expedition sent to the ends of the earth in Christ’s name...it has become less and less possible to speak of the missionary task otherwise than as the embassy of the whole people of God to the whole world.”⁵

Once the missionary dimension (IMC) was brought into the WCC it was evident that the ecumenical movement recognized the missionary nature of the Church. It is like “missional church” before missional church. In fact, this was nothing new in 1961 either. it was just newly rediscovered. If you would pardon me now, speaking in Dallas I would like to put in a good word for the away team: Pittsburgh. The formation of the Synod of Pittsburgh, in 1802, recognized the missionary nature of the church.⁶ Pittsburgh was a frontier area and its Synod was formed out of Virginia, not Philadelphia. On September 29th, 1802 at a meeting at First Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh, the Synod of Pittsburgh was formed from the Presbyteries of Redstone, Ohio and Erie. They passed two important resolutions at that time:

“That the Synod of Pittsburgh shall be styled the Western Foreign Missionary Society...and...the object of the Missionary Society is to diffuse the knowledge of the Gospel among the inhabitants of the new settlements, the Indian tribes, and if need be, among some of the interior inhabitants, where they are not able to support the Gospel.”

These resolutions were intended to affirm that each member of the Synod should regard himself as under obligations to carry the Gospel to the destitute, and as bound by virtue of his connection with the Synod, to contribute his most earnest prayers his most mature counsel, and his largest official influence to the success of this great work.⁷

This sounds pretty healthy to me.⁸

C. Changes in the World: Not as much as we think

The older I get the more I realize that what I used to think was so new and strange is actually neither. When we look at the changes I have listed, think of them as small rather than huge; as slight redirections rather than as seismic shifts in human culture. Only one of these changes in our world do I consider major, and that is the first.

1. **Flat World** describes the matrix of changes that have transformed global communications, information sharing and business structures. This is almost as major as the invention of moveable type. I have written about this before and I am sure that many of you have read what I have to say.⁹ This is the greatest change to which we are now adapting. In brief, I believe that Thomas Friedman is generally correct in his descriptive section that we live in a

⁵ Lesslie Newbigin, *Trinitarian Doctrine for Today’s Mission*. (London: Paternoster Press, 1963), p. 12.

⁶ The Puritans settling in Massachusetts imperfectly understood this, seeking in various ways to reach out to local inhabitants, and even sending local pastors to plant churches in various regions of New England. See Joseph Tracey, *History of American Missions to the Heathen...*

⁷ Elliot E. Swift, “Missionary History,” in Centenary Memorial, p. 155.

⁸ This discussion is all in house. If we were to go outside of our Presbyterian heritage in the USA, there would be many more and equally valuable lines of continuity that we could see.

⁹ “Presbyterian mission in a flat world,” in *The Presbyterian Outlook*, December 18, 2006; December 25, 2006; January 1, 2007.

blended world where flat world technology gives greater access to information and has almost decimated the organizational hierarchies of the past. But this unlimited access works best with the support and proper involvement of the corporation or the traditional institutions. The corporate structure alone continues to work with primary concerns for control and initiative coming from the center. Those who continue to insist upon this will be left behind. The blended model, where institutions promote networks of creativity and then help to process and promote the work, these are the institutions that will survive and be effective. This means that geographic location does not matter and real time meetings are less important. This is true in education (blended learning), in worship (blended worship), in business (blended management) and in other fields. The future in the corporate world is collaboration rather than competition, moving away from privatized and possessive to communal and sharing in common. Frankly, for those of us who remember Peter's sermon (Acts 2) this can be seen as more Christian.

This technological (communications) revolution which has changed the world, makes it possible for any medium-sized church with a mission vision to carry out their own mission. On one level, the big agencies are not necessary. You can learn to build an atomic bomb on the internet, and you can diagnose your own illnesses. For example in the medical field, doctors are no longer gods; they are being challenged by their patients. My father warned my mother's doctor about Co-enzyme Q-10 supplements for my mother. The doctor didn't know anything about it, even though clinical studies began in the 1960s and accelerated in the 1980s. Major studies regarding its benefits for the neurological system, and as an antioxidant have been out for about 20 years. All of this my father learned from the internet. This is the major change that has taken place and it has changed both how we do mission and how our young people are learning about the world and about mission.

2. One **Cold War** has become hundreds of hot wars (religious and ethnic rather than national). In reading 2,000 years of Christian history and after reading 332 surveys of (mostly) retired missionaries, I have been reminded that we always have carried out Kingdom labor in dangerous zones. The world is still not a safe place,¹⁰ and ever since Genesis three it never has been.

3. **Communism's collapse and reconfiguration** was not at all expected and it is still working itself out. This has meant that we are now more actively involved in more countries than after the collapse of colonialism. We are developing partnerships and new patterns of ministry in China, Vietnam, Cambodia, Russia, Eastern Europe, Central Asia, the Balkans and other regions that we considered "closed" to Christian work. In most of these countries we do not have resident "missionaries," but we are finding ways to partner with local Churches. Pittsburgh Theological Seminary is involved in various patterns of ministry in Vietnam, Cambodia, China, and Russia. This was impossible 30 years ago. In all cases (I repeat) we work with local Christian communities. Christian presence is our basic missiology in most cases.

4. **Muslim violence** has come to us. I have been writing on the history of Christianity globally and, in every century from the 7th on, the relationship between Christian communities and Muslim communities is a major issue. All of the varieties of cooperation and coercion, of appreciation and apprehension have been lived out. What is different is that we are so ignorant, isolationist and naïve. It should be clear that we need increased engagement, communal, and real-life contact.

5. **Emigration patterns** continue to evolve in the U.S. so that more than ever, God is bringing the nations to us. Emigration, immigration and the movements of people both forced

¹⁰ There will be more on this later.

and chosen is a major theme of Christianity through the centuries. We need to be aware that this is a common theme, but the patterns change every decade or so today. Since so many people from Asia and Africa are coming to us, this saves a lot on travel expenses.

6. **Economic upheavals** that we still do not comprehend affect us. With the growth of East Asian economies, it is now very expensive to support a mission co-worker in East Asia. Almost all mission co-workers in East Asia need to live there as tent-makers. Economic growth in East Asia and south Asia is quite remarkable and (as always) uneven. In East Asia those living on \$1 a day has dropped from nearly 60% to about 20%. Millions have benefited, but new patterns of poverty have developed. Poverty in Africa remains with little positive on the horizon. Still, the bottom 25 nations on the United Nation index of “quality of life” are in Africa. Many East Asian Christians are able to make significant financial contributions to global mission, with currency as strong as the Euro or dollar. There is no direct correlation between Christian growth and poverty.

7. **Young people** are more willing to take great risks. There are a number of youthful movements today. Many if not most college students get involved in some type of social service activity. In some colleges up to ½ of the students study overseas for a semester or a year, and YWAM sends out tens of thousands of young people on short term missions (at least 2 years or more) each year. Many young Christian students are experimenting with missional and multi-cultural churches that are intentionally cross-cultural, urban and that require a high level of sacrifice. There is a budding Protestant monastic movement¹¹ that is focused upon a missional lifestyle, not just spirituality that makes them feel good. They seek lifestyles that involve sacrifice before fulfillment. For five years I led a 6:30 a.m. semi-evangelistic, gut-splitting and knee slapping funny, some-what inductive Bible study for high school boys. Some were Christians, some were not and some became Christians. One of the boys is now 24 and he has moved to a dump in Nicaragua to live with orphaned children. He is with them, and helps them, not out of his wealth, but as one of them. His parents are concerned. I try not to take credit, but he did read about Jesus and I guess he took it seriously. “If anyone would come after me, sell all he has, give to the poor and come...”

8. **Mission trips**, for many Americans (not just Presbyterians) have replaced missionaries. Six times as many “missionaries” are going on one or two week trips as are actually moving overseas. Most of the missionary travel today, and most of the contact is going to be mission trips of one to two weeks and most of it from the U.S.A. is to the Caribbean and then Latin America. The loss of career, truly enculturated missionaries is noticed by all. In addition, less than 9% of the career missionaries are now from the mainline churches in the United States. It was 80% a century ago. Thus, we are just a drop in the bucket when you consider that there are over 42,000 long term missionaries overseas from North America now.¹² Mission trips are happening, will happen and we need to inject them with protein and wisdom, with humility and power.

D. Changes in Christianity, in the PCUSA and mission

1. Great Reversal of Global Christianity: Christianity has had its greatest and most sudden transformation ever. Never has so much changed so quickly. It will take us another 20-50

¹¹ See *the New Friars*, by Scott A. Bssenecker and *Introductory Bibliography for a New Monasticism* by Christopher Smith. There are at least 20 books on Amazon listed under “New Monasticism.”

¹² Jaffarian, p. 35.

years to fully absorb what this means.¹³ About 2/3rds of the Christians in the world live in LAFRIASIA and the ratio grows daily. Not only the number of baptized, but the number of active Christians and the number of institutions also grow daily outside of the North Atlantic world. Since volumes have been written on this I only want to underscore that this is the most important change that has taken place and everything that follows is little in comparison. Christianity is a non-western religion and we now must submit and be students of African, Latin American and Asian Christianity. Most of the growth, by the way, is from the Spiritual (non-mainline) family.

2. Spiritual Churches lead Christian growth: Of the 4 Christian families (Orthodox, R.C. Protestant and Spiritual) the fourth has had a tremendous resurgence globally. These are churches that often are started by a prophet or Christian lay person who has a vision or prophesy. Even when the churches that are growing are from the Protestant family, they often have more of a Spirit dimension to them. Of the two great movements of Christianity in the 20th century (Pentecostal and Ecumenical) the spiritual continues and shows no sign of slowing down. We will need to be more Pentecostal as we continue our global engagement. Byron D. Klaus, president of the Assemblies of God Seminary suggests that the best way to understand Pentecostalism is through the lens of mission. Pentecostalism is Protestantism on missional steroids.¹⁴

3. We are here together talking. Well, this is a change. I am an outsider who has never been to a General Assembly, never been on a task force and was only appointed as a PCUSA mission co-worker because of personal intervention mixed with Korean Confucian sense of respect for one's teacher. As I look at the participants here, it is clear that something has changed. The inclusion of many mission initiators in this gathering is the sign of something wonderful and new. I am glad and honored to be a part of this change.

4. WM is supporting and encouraging networks and partnerships. Presbyteries and local churches have been taking their own initiative in mission for decades, but in the recent years WM has begun to provide some support and coordination. Many of us here are involved in these new patterns of mission. I am involved with an eclectic group in the China Network as we work with Insik Kim on our purpose statement and with others on our website. WM working with networks and partnerships is a wonderful change and, as I will remark later, it shows some of the blended structure that we must wisely and carefully develop for the future.

5. "Foot dragging" and "one size" policies are gone: As I mentioned in #3 above, I am here by accident. I guess on one level we all are. The "process" did not work for me, because even with a PhD in mission and Christian history, there was no place for me in Presbyterian mission. As a number of retired missionaries called it, there used to be a foot-dragging policy regarding new appointments and new initiatives. As part of the Presbyterian Mission History project, both surveys and interviews revealed this perception. Also mentioned in the interviews was the "one-size-fits-all" policy that applied nationalization of churches and integration of national missions in a cookie cutter fashion. It created some problems and in our interviews, the polite, positive and perceptive missionaries pointed this out. I believe this intentional retraction

¹³ See Walter Buhmann, *The Coming of the Third Church* (1978), Lamin Sanneh's *Whose Religion is Christianity? The Gospel Beyond the West*, Vincent J. Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered: An Epistle from the Masai*, Bediako, Kwame, *Christianity in Africa: the Renewal of a Non-Western Religion*, Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The coming of Global Christianity*, and Andrew Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (1996) and *The Cross0Cultural Process in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission and Appropriation of Faith* (2002).

¹⁴ Byron D. Klaus, "Pentecostalism and Mission" in *Missiology*, vol. 35, #1, January, 2007. pp. 39-54.

policy (related to the call for moratorium on missions) has prevented many good Presbyterians from doing many good things for the Kingdom in the world. Many of us could give other illustrations. That is not necessary. It is a great change that these policies are gone.

6. Financial paradox: Giving to the PCUSA continues to increase, while giving to WM decreases and our population decreases. There is much money in the PCUSA and much money being given to mission. Less and less goes through the Synods and the General Assembly and that is one of the reasons we are here.

7. Changing partners? Our partners have changed, or more accurately, they have expanded and diversified. At the height of the ecumenical movement it was clear and easy to list our mission partners. This is not so much the case today. With increased communications and with so many Christians coming to the United States to study we have many partners that have developed through personal relationship; most are not “official partners.” A few examples will suffice. Our work in Russia involves new partners: Korean Presbyterians, Russian Orthodox and Pentecostals. Our partnership with the Presbyterian churches in Singapore and Malaysia, and Malawi came later, because these were churches started by Presbyterians from Scotland, and then later we came in. Local Presbyteries, seminaries, not to mention local churches are generating all types of new partnerships. They are generally working with local church entities, but they may be much too ecumenical (or Pentecostal) for us. We retain, for the most part, traditional partners, but the number is expanding. With the increasing number of partners, new problems and new opportunities are developing.

III. What has not changed? As I have mentioned earlier, very little has really changed. “The world’s need and the Gospel imperative have not changed.”

A. In our world:

1. Governments and people: Most Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists will say, “I like Americans, I just do not like your government.” We have always had the handicap and the joy of being from the United States. We have resources such as money, education, global contacts, and a great heritage of missionary involvement. However when we travel in mission and ask what local people think about Americans, most people do not hate us. I have found in my experience that from Pakistan to Japan, from Nepal to Indonesia that people like to talk to Americans. They find us optimistic, helpful and full of ideas. However, depending upon where you are, they may not like our government. That’s o.k. I didn’t like the rule of many of the Popes, and yet I like most Catholics. I didn’t like Constantine, but I liked many of the writings of Christians of the period. I don’t like the government in Myanmar, Sudan or Kenya, but I like the people in those countries. Negotiating empire and mission, governments and ministry is still a delicate matter.

2. Wars continue and so peacemaking and reconciliation in Christ are still key. I have read letters that my grandfather wrote to my grandmother when he was on a ship going to fight in Europe in 1915. I have spoken to my father about World War II, and I have spoken to my daughter’s roommate from college who did two rounds of duty as a fairly small Chinese-American woman in Iraq. In most of our lifetimes, it has been Korea, Vietnam, killing squads in Central America, Kosovo, Khmer Rouge, Shining Path, Biafra, Palestine, Lebanon, Iraq, Liberia, Darfur, and now will it be Kenya? In each of these places Christians have had and will have a role to play, but it involves great risks.

3. Young people are still parochial:¹⁵ Our young people are about as uninformed about the world as ever. With communications as good as they are, you still have to work really hard to find out what is happening outside of the U.S. and one or two politically hot spots. We have Christian sisters and brothers all over the world, but our young people are mostly ignorant of all of this. Only those who have gone on good mission trips, or who attend exceptional churches will learn about the world of need.

4. The U.S. dollar is still powerful and seductive. We may feel poor, but in fact, we are so rich it is a sin.

B. Theological interlude; What I am supposed to talk about here is about what has not changed in our church. But that would be boring and of very little value. If something has not changed it is possible that it should have changed. What has not changed may be the very thing which is draining the blood out of our mission body. What I think will be more valuable is to place before us what I think must not change. Here I submit a recommended theological tapestry for us. If we are talking about change in the WM and in how we do mission, let's be careful to be guided by what is still true and always has been true.

All of the changes are really quite small if we start with what matters, which is our primary calling as a church. Before we go off and change our structures, or vote on a new statement, let's remember what the church is all about. Without getting caught up in the distinctions between a denomination, a mission society, the ecumenical Church, the Church Universal and the Reformed Family, let's start with the nature of the church and her calling.

**The Church has two purposes:
To worship God, and to participate in God's mission.
These can be expressed as one overall purpose: to glorify God in the nations.¹⁶**

As churches develop they get very complex, but fundamentally the church, our church, your local church, this church in Dallas is alive as it lives according to its birth right: to glorify God (which means to worship God) and to declare his glory. The two are of one fabric. A cursory study of glory and of nations in the Bible makes this very clear: all that we do must have that single trajectory of glorifying God.

What of all of our other programs, such as Christian education, counseling, clinics, homeless ministry, weddings, etc? All of these other activities are part of the two. When we do a wedding it is an act of worship. When we educate the clergy or the youth, it is so they can worship God aright and participate in God's mission along with the rest of the church. Education, counseling, choirs are not ends in themselves. I would suggest that we keep our roots firmly established here. Worship overflows into mission and mission declares, in word and deed, God's glory to the nations.

¹⁵ After nearly 4 years of war in Iraq and after nearly 6 years of U.S. military engagement in Afghanistan 60% of American youth (18-25) could not find Iraq on a map of the Middle East and 90 % could not find Afghanistan on a map of central Asia. (From 2006 National Geographic study. Accessed January 11, 2008: <http://www.voanews.com/english/archive/2006-05/2006-05-11-voa44.cfm>)

¹⁶ In our Constitution the "Great Ends of the Church" are an elaboration or exegesis of this: "...the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of human kind; the shelter, nurture and spiritual fellowship of the children of God; the maintenance of divine worship; the presentation of the truth; the promotion of social righteousness and the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world."

I would like us to look briefly at four “mission windows.” These are passages that record transitions or openings into God’s mission. Each of these scriptures help to remind us what it is that must not change. They are in chronological order: Luke 4: (Jesus’ Inaugural Address), Matthew 28: 16-20 (Jesus’ Commission), Acts 1:8 and 2 (Church Foundation), and Revelation 7 (Heavenly Vision). We will start with the last and then move forward. The future must guide the present.

Revelation 7:9-17 describes where we are going. This has not changed since it was first recorded. I would suggest that if this is where we are going, then our mission and our worship should be shaped by this eschatology. By analogy, if you are going to win the Boston marathon, you adjust your schedule, your diet and even your friendships now. So it is best in our consideration of what has not changed that we begin with where we end. I will make only three observations here.

First, John is in such shock at what he sees in heaven that he repeats himself. Usually, as we all know, Semitic poetry is made up of distichs or two words or lines in parallel. John is so shocked to see all the different ethnic groups that he does a double distich: nation/ethnic group (*ethnos*) and tribe (*phulon*); every people (*laon/laos*) and language (*glossa*). In four different ways John has identified that heaven is a place where all languages or all ethnic groups are represented. It was overwhelming to John; he almost got stuck, but then he ran out of synonyms. Many languages.

Secondly, the passage makes it very clear that heaven, our place of repose is centered on Jesus Christ. Either symbolically or directly he is identified as the center of heavenly worship eleven times. The lamb who is the shepherd is the focus of the nations, of the angels, of the elders, of the four heavenly creatures. Sacrificial lamb is the savior. Sheltering shepherd is the Lord. Many language, but one Lord.

Thirdly, in heaven there will be no more suffering, no more tears. In this world we have much suffering and we cry tears that seem to drown us. Sometimes the suffering in the world seems to overwhelm us. But in heaven all suffering is gone. The sun will not strike the wandering homeless in Darfur. The drought stricken in the Sahel will have living waters that never end. So heaven, the place of our future is a place where there are many languages, one lamb and no tears. We are given a mission vision, a worship vision and an ethical vision, but I believe it is best to keep them together. In our mission and worship and lives we work toward this end; that all people, from every nation or ethnic group will be included, will be loved and will look to Jesus. Now we move backward in the canon of Scripture to Acts, early Church history.

Acts 2 we often say is the birth of the Church, but it is actually the birth of the Jewish church. At this point Gentiles are still a long step away to be included. The inclusion of the Gentiles was mandated (Matt. 28), prophesied (Matt 2, Luke 4 et. al), enacted (Acts 10), and its fulfillment envisioned (Rev. 7 and Isaiah 2, etc.). However, in Acts 2 we see three special concerns which have never changed for the Church.

First, at its birth the Church is marked by the Holy Spirit’s power and direction (Acts 1:8, 2:3,4,17-21, 33, 38, 39, 43). The Holy Spirit, in fact, is the active agent and the powerful presence throughout the book of Acts, throughout Christian history, and in our lives. “Peter, full of the Holy Spirit, Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, Paul full of the Holy Spirit;” these are the refrains of the early church. In the 20th century this is one of the two most significant recoveries that the global Church witnessed.¹⁷

¹⁷ The other we have mentioned already, the ecumenical movement.

Secondly, a clear message was delivered in the midst of confusion and this message focused upon Jesus Christ (2:22-24, 31-36, 38f). Peter's sermon was biblical (Joel 2, Psalms 16 and 110), it was historical, it was theological, it was about Jesus Christ, and his message increased the size of the church. Preaching that is focused upon Jesus Christ results in repentance and baptisms. In that particular day there were 3,000 added (but usually it is not that many).

Thirdly when this outward looking church was born, it formed a new type of sacrificial community. The description of this community has been the foundation for many good (and some tacky) sermons: "They devoted themselves to the apostle's teaching and to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as they had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved." The missional community was evangelistic owing to the genuine love and mutual forbearance that was present. The local church itself is missional, for daily people were being baptized into the Kingdom of God. Both preaching Jesus and living in a Jesus Community are missional.

Matthew 28: 16-20¹⁸ became the rallying cry for mission only in recent Protestant history. It was a nineteenth century phenomenon when mission began to be defended and described more as proof-texting than as a theology of the church. This passage did not drive most Roman Catholic missions in previous centuries, nor did it motivate the Puritans and early Pietists in their missionary endeavors. None-the-less, it has been the *locus classicus* for mission in the past century and a half, and it is something that has not changed, so we need to look once more at this passage. I wish to point out a few reminders. The "going" is assumed. The form of "go" is not an imperative, but it is an aorist passive. It does not really mean "as you go," but it is a type of assumed activity in the past, as if something has been accomplished. Jesus doesn't say "go," it is more like, "having gone," or "in going."

Secondly, there is one command and it is the focus of the church: make "disciples." According to David Bosch, and most New Testament scholars would agree, Matthew is about discipleship, making followers of Jesus. Remember, the main activity that the Church is sent out to the world to, and the main focus of the preaching of Acts 2 at the birth of the church at Pentecost had to do with Jesus Christ: making disciples of Jesus and preaching about Jesus.

Thirdly, I believe that what follows (baptizing and teaching all) is an elaboration of making disciples. When we are sent to make disciples in our neighborhoods, we are to enroll in baptism and teach all that Jesus taught. The inclusive nature of the teaching is somewhat enigmatic. We might wonder when does this end? When have we taught all that Jesus taught? Well, the simple answer is that we do it until Jesus returns, or we return to be with Jesus. I had dinner with Sam and Eileen Moffett last summer a few times and they are still following this command. In the retirement community where they live, there are some embittered people and some who are alienated from God. The Moffetts pray for them and seek to make disciples. Until the end of the age, or until the end of your age. We never retire from making disciples.

¹⁸ In fact, Jesus' last words of commission are found in different contexts and texts in the N.T. Matthew 28: 18-20; Mark 16:15-16; Luke 24:45-49; John 20:21-23; and Acts 1:8. In all cases Jesus' concern is that his followers go out (or more properly, they are sent), disciples (preach), the message deals with sin and forgiveness and all nations are the "extent" of their commission.

Fourthly, much has been made of this, and there has been much criticism of this, but in the passage I think it is significant that it does not say make disciples of everyone, or of “all people” or “all men” (who need it more than the women). *Panta ta ethne* means simply to all nations or groups of people and Luke records the same: to all ethnic groups. Mark says we are to preach to all the earth. Extensive preaching, intensive discipleship.

Luke 4:14-30 is a text most of us have preached on many times. It has been a classic text for liberation theology and for ministries of compassion and justice. I think all of these concerns are in this passage, but much more. This is Jesus’ inaugural address, as placed by Luke in his two-volume history. As Revelation 7 looks ahead to where we are going, Luke 4 looks ahead to Jesus’ ministry and the work of the Kingdom. Jesus says in his inaugural address, “Listen here, everyone, I have chosen this passage from Isaiah 61 as my watchword. I am telling you upfront what I am going to do, and after I leave here (if I get out of here alive) I will do it.” There are four simple things we need to remember about Jesus being sent, and about our being sent. Luke then illustrates these in the rest of his Gospel narrative.

1. We are **sent to preach good news**. The word for mission (*apostello*) is used to describe Jesus as being sent by the Spirit of the Lord. The NRSV misses it, but it is clear in the text. *Apostelkein me* (“...has sent me”) is plucked right down in the middle of the first sentence. Being sent means that you take residence with the other (here it is among the poor). But being sent is also, first of all to give a verbal message. The most intimate form of communication, the most powerful form of communication is the written or spoken word. “I love you just the way you are.” “Why can’t you be smart like your sister?” These are words that can destroy or give life. Jesus was sent to proclaim good news, in fact the best news. The Word was made flesh.

2. Secondly, the **good news is release, freedom, or liberation**. Jesus, in reading from Isaiah 61, highlighted one of the issues that was always difficult for Israel: God’s holiness for the world would be seen in Israel’s care for the poor and oppressed. The widow, the orphan, the poor, the “alien in your land,” were always the ones in need of special care; these were the ones that the followers of YHWH were to care for, so that the nations would know what God was like. Jesus comes (in a word) to release (*apheimi/ aphin/ aphi*). The same word for forgiveness also means to release. The double entendre should not surprise us. Isn’t God about releasing us to worship and serve him?

3. Thirdly, the message of Jesus’ mission is both good news of liberation AND it is inclusion of the outsiders. Jews expected the Day of the Lord to be vengeance as well as mercy. Jesus preached mercy to all. The evangelistic message is for Jews and their enemies together, a message that is rooted in God as creator of all. First century Jews looked for an anointed one who would bring down God’s judgment on the nations. Jesus, the one anointed by the Lord’s Spirit moved them from exclusion to embrace. They would have none of it, and so they sought to kill him.

4. Finally, the message of Jesus, if spoken and lived clearly, could get you killed. If you would preach Good News, if you would bring liberation and healing to the poor and if you would embrace all nations, races and ethnic groups in the name of Jesus Christ, you too might be misunderstood. “We want judgment on *them*.” Or, today it may be, “We want to keep them excluded from Jesus.” All four of the above are elements of Jesus’ inaugural address: preaching Good news, liberation for the oppressed, embracing the other and suffering for such clarity and conviction.

What have we learned here? I believe that it is imperative that we hold firmly onto our Trinitarian nature of Christian mission. The Triune God calls us into a triune mission.

**We are called by God, sent by Jesus Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit
to proclaim to all nations the worship of God through Jesus Christ
as we work to wipe away every tear from every eye.**

IV. A Modest Proposal and Openings for Future Mission¹⁹

I began by talking about the greatest change that has taken place in mission: it is now safe. Mission of some sort is something that most anyone can do on their vacation. However, we are deceived if we think this is really the mission we are called to. Christian mission is still very costly. Sell your home, live off less, give more, sell your belongings, move to North Africa. We have young people who are ready to take up the challenge. We are able in so many different ways, and in so many different places to participate in God's mission. We still live in a world tearing itself apart, where poverty and disease, violence and ecological disasters are pressing in upon us. There is much to do and to whom much is given, much is expected.

It is my opinion that even though changes in the global scene seem so overwhelming that not much has really changed. We still have the clear commission to proclaim, to include all ethnic groups, and to wipe away the tears of suffering and oppression in this world. Thus, what has changed in terms of our strategy and approach has little to do with our goals and our purpose. Now we must adapt slightly and return to blended structures of mission that involve open sharing of resources and extensive communication while embracing ecumenical diversity. I offer seven statements to start our discussion.

1. World Mission must continue to **move from being a regulatory agency to become an enabling partner**. We must have a basic predisposition to encourage and guide, rather than to control and regulate. WM must become more wiki-like and less General Motors-like. It must be more participatory, communal and process oriented; in a word, more post-modern. This is beginning to happen with the networks, PFF, Boarder Ministry, PGF, networks, partnerships, etc.
2. World Mission **should encourage diversity in Presbyterian mission approach and involvement while maintaining the unity of Presbyterian mission**. One of the organizational keys today is to respond to diverse needs with diverse servers under a single source: I-phone. Younger people will be able to enter Presbyterian mission better with a diversity of options and our partners overseas will see one Presbyterian Church. One concrete suggestion is that WM have a single website that lists all the other present (and future) mission initiators by region, type, and concerns (education, frontier, health care, development). Inquirers, whether they be churches or individuals, would then be directed to specific initiators, networks, or partnerships.

¹⁹ At the recent Global Christian Forum, held in Limuru, Kenya (the most diverse Christian gathering ever) Cheryl Bridges-Johns of the Church of God (Cleveland, TN) commented that something new and very dramatic is happening in global church relations. She referred to the birth of a calf, where the birds of prey watch overhead; will it live? At this important forum, it was clear that a revolution in mission and church relations was being described. Similarly, such revolutionary changes in relationships need to be acknowledged here. (From the November 6-9, 2007 gathering website: www.globalchristianforum.org or <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/events-sections/global-christian-forum/reflections.html#c16627>)

3. **Encourage more long term mission co-workers.** Responsible mission requires people who have “put on” more of the local culture and who have earned the confidence and trust of local religious leaders. This is critical with so many mission groups traveling around the world. We need faithful presence in diverse contexts.

4. World Mission must see one of its main responsibilities as **education and preparation** for mission. With more diverse programs, and (likely) more sending and receiving groups, education becomes critical. If WM becomes less of a regulatory agency, its enabling must have a strong education component. Mission education materials should be produced that are focused on particular regions, particular religious contexts, particular missional needs and particular church contexts. This will help to ensure the highest standards among Presbyterians in mission.²⁰

5. Presbyterian mission initiators (including partnerships and networks) should be encouraged to do what they do best: **recruiting, raising funds, linking with particular needs overseas, linking with local churches.**

6. The blended model will require that **freedom is given to the various mission initiators**, but Presbyterian mission will be held together through:

- a. education
- b. a common orientation (with shared responsibilities)
- c. a common application, common financial guidelines, and common evaluation

procedures.

7. **A common vision of Christian mission should guide all Presbyterian Mission.**

Personally, I like the statements I have mentioned above which emphasize the Trinitarian nature of mission and the eschatological focus.

V. **Reminder:** Mission comes from the **margins** and from the **heart**

What does the future hold for PCUSA mission, or more importantly for God’s mission in the world? I have no idea, you see I am a historian, not a prophet, but as a historian I do have two final notes that are closely related. Our future will come from the margins and from the heart. It will come from the margins of society and from the margins of the church. But it will come from the heart of God as incarnated in our own sacrificial lives.

Whatever the future of God’s mission might be, you will not find it coming from me, or from any seminary professor. You will not find the future coming from New York, Louisville, London, Pasadena, Dallas or any other important center. Mission innovation and mission futures always come from the margins, from the youth, from the poor, from the little people who are often overlooked. The future, frankly will be set by Asians, Latin Americans and Africans. It will come from youth and it will come from people who are not properly trained. Look at the margins and at the marginal. Then, when you find out what is happening, praise God and see what it means for us to be faithful to this new thing God is doing. Remember, mission comes from the margins; when it does, celebrate it and participate in it.

Secondly, the future of mission, as with the past, is with those who have taken on the heart of Christ for the world. It is not with those who have merely planned, strategized and

²⁰ Here is where we would promote our understanding of “partnership,” use of money (“invest in people”), ecumenical partners, history of the churches in that country, history of our past involvement, etc.

organized. Nineteenth century Roman Catholic mission spirituality was consumed with the idea of the sacred heart of Jesus, a vision and a spirituality that first was broadly proclaimed in 17th century Europe by a 28 year old woman, Marguerite Marie Alicoque (1647-1690). In her spiritual and physical mortifications she claimed to have had a vision of the flaming sacred heart of Jesus held out and covered with thorns. It was Christ's heart, sacrificed for the people. The vision became an inspiration in missional activities; churches and individuals taking on the same love of Christ, the same heart of Christ, for the world. So mission really does come from the heart, but not from the heart of an institution or a society. Mission comes from the suffering heart of Christ which has been planted in our heart. We need heart surgery before anything else.

Speaking of hearts, Aaron's heart was to be covered when he came into God's presence. His heart was to be covered with precious and semi-precious stones: onyx, carnelian, chrysolite, emerald, turquoise, sapphire, moonstone, jacinth, agate, amethyst, beryl, onyx, jasper, all set in gold. All of this symbolized the sacredness and the power of Aaron's breastpiece. More valuable than the gems was what was inscribed on the gems. "There shall be twelve stones with names corresponding to the names of the sons of Israel." "So, Aaron shall bear the names of the sons of Israel in the breastpiece of judgment on his heart when he goes into the holy place, for a continual remembrance before the Lord." (Exodus 28:29) Over his heart, or on our hearts are inscribed the names of God's people. With the names of God's people on our hearts, we come, not to a Holy Temple, not to a Holy Tent of meeting, but we go to the margins, to the Holiest place of all, the foot of the cross. This is not only our *ministry*—bearing the burdens of others and so fulfilling the law of Christ—but it is our *destiny* and our only *identity*. "Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need like some people, letters of recommendation to your or from you? You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everybody. You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone, but on tablets of human hearts." (II Corinthians 3:1-3) May our hearts, be engraved with the names of the nations. May our hearts suffer with, (have the compassion of) Jesus Christ whose death we bear each day, that the life of Christ may come to the world.

Appendix I Organizational Heritage

The relationship of structure (or structures) to mission is a complex one. Our Presbyterian mission history has a mixed heritage. The following description comes in large part from the Presbyterian Historical Society in Philadelphia:

"The establishment in 1837 of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.'s (Old School) Board of Foreign Missions (BFM) signaled the beginning of a worldwide missionary operation destined to embrace approximately fifteen countries located on four different continents. Presbyterian interest in foreign missions however predated the creation of the BFM by almost three-quarters of a century. The American Presbyterian Church has been committed from its inception to the belief that it is a missionary church and that every member is a missionary. By the end of the eighteenth century, increasing interest in missions was manifested by the creation of several local and independent missionary

societies including the New York Missionary Society (1796); the Northern Berkshire and Columbia Missionary Societies (1797); the Missionary Society of Connecticut (1798); the Massachusetts Missionary Society (1799); and the Boston Female Society for Missionary Purposes (1800). These societies helped to prepare the foundation for the later and larger denominational boards. Though membership was interdenominational, Presbyterians were prominent in several, notably the New York and Northern societies. While many individual Presbyterians were active in these missionary societies, the church's judicatories were not indifferent to the subject of missions. As early as 1763, the Synod of New York ordered that a collection for missions be taken, with a pronouncement in 1767 that this be done annually. At the first General Assembly in 1789, each of the four synods were requested to recommend two missionaries to the General Assembly the following year, whose support was to be provided by the presbyteries. In 1802, the General Assembly created the Standing Committee on Missions, which theoretically worked in conjunction with the presbyteries and European missionary societies.²¹ Successive General Assemblies authorized additional funds, and in a single year the Standing Committee on Missions reported the appointment of fifty-one new missionaries. In 1816, the Standing Committee recommended to the General Assembly that it be merged into a more permanent organization known as the "Board of Missions acting under the authorization of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A." The General Assembly authorized and directed the Board to establish church auxiliary missionary societies that would extend its own operation. In 1817, the General Assembly joined the Dutch Reformed and Associate Reformed Churches in establishing the United Foreign Missionary Society. The Society's constitution declared that "the object of the Society shall be to spread the Gospel among the Indians of North America, the inhabitants of Mexico and South America, and in other portions of the heathen and anti-Christian world." In 1826, the Society's work was transferred to the Congregational Church's American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) primarily because it was felt that the existence of two missionary organizations appealing to the same constituency was unwise and that a merger would strengthen the expanding operations of the ABCFM. Hence, the ABCFM became the recognized missionary agency for both the Congregationalist and Presbyterian churches.

²¹ At the formation of the Synod of Pittsburgh, Wednesday, September 29, 1802, it was resolved, "That the Synod of Pittsburgh shall be styled the Western Missionary Society." A second resolution passed also at that meeting at First Presbyterian Church, "The object of the Missionary Society is to diffuse the knowledge of the Gospel among the inhabitants of the new settlements, the Indian tribes, and if need be, among some of the interior inhabitants, where they are not able to support the Gospel." Western Missionary Society joined the United Foreign Missionary Society (founded 1817) in 1825, and struggling with poor finances, the ABCFM took over the work of the UFMS, and took over their debt. The Western Missionary Society had its own periodical, *Western Missionary Magazine and Repository of Religious Intelligence* (1803) which came out monthly. The WMS was the most active of various Synods (Carolinas, Virginia, Kentucky), sponsoring missionary work to American frontier regions, but this was the most active according to Ashbel Green in his *History of the Domestic and Foreign Missions in the Presbyterian Church*.

In 1829 the work of the WMS was transferred to the General Assembly and in 1831 the Western Foreign Missionary Society was organized, also in Pittsburgh. From 1827 the Synod had directed local churches to designate their funds given to the WMS as being for "Domestic" or "Foreign" missions.

Women's missionary societies, did not lag far behind as we often assume. The Presbytery of Western Reserve notes that one of the first women's mission societies was founded from a local church in their Presbytery. From the website of Western Reserve: "A Women's Foreign Missionary Society was formed in the First Church of Cleveland as early as 1833. It was succeeded by the Women's Presbyterian Foreign Missionary Society in 1873. The women's Presbyterian Home Missionary Society was organized in 1881."

Appendix II

The following is found on a bronze plaque outside of the President's office at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary:

1831-1931

Always the most forward and active Synod of the Presbyterian Church in missional enterprise and effort, the Synod of Pittsburgh kept alive and cherished the missionary spirit until it diffused its power into an organization embracing the whole Presbyterian Church, and having for its object the conversion of the world.

And, under this new form of organization – which may properly be said to have had its commencement in the Synod of Pittsburgh in 1831, when the Western Foreign Missionary Society was constituted – in the persons of her heroic sons, educated within the walls of her own institutions, she promptly led the way, in preaching the gospel to the crowded millions of Northern India, China and Africa, and the scattered tribes of the Aboriginal inhabitants of our own continent.

Nor, has she been lacking since in furnishing her proportion of missionary laborers.

Dr. David Elliott, Professor, W.T.S. 1836 ▼ 1974

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