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The Asian Diaspora Missions: Similar Cultures and Worldviews

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INTRODUCTION

According to reports by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the rising phenomenon of intraregional¹ and interregional² Asian migration represents an increasing missions opportunity for Asian churches. The author is a member of the Chinese diaspora residing in the U.S. Since 2009, she has been reaching multi-ethnic diasporas—predominantly of Asian origin—in California’s Silicon Valley. She has found reaching the Asian diaspora easier than reaching non-Asians because their cultures and worldviews tend to be similar despite external differences. The purpose of this paper is to discuss leveraging this missional opportunity, focusing first on the Asian diaspora and subsequently expanding to non-Asians after gaining the experience necessary to broaden the diverse Kingdom of God. This paper constitutes a continuation of research on the subject of Asian Diaspora Missions, and was originally written for the 15th Triennial Convention of the Asia Missions Association.³

DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS

Key terms used in this paper are defined as follows:

- Culture: The framework by which people order their lives, interpret their experiences, and

1. International Organization for Migration (IOM), *Asia-Pacific Migration Report 2025* (Bangkok: IOM Asia Pacific Regional Data Hub, 2025), under “search,” https://roasiapacific.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl671/files/documents/2025-11/ap_mdr-2025-.pdf (accessed February 4, 2026).

2. International Organization for Migration, “World Migration Report 2024,” under “reports,” <https://worldmigrationreport.iom.int/site/wmr-2024-interactive/> (accessed February 25, 2026).

3. Juno Wang, “The Asian Diaspora Missions: Glocal Network and Kingdom Partnership” (workshop presentation, the 15th Triennial Convention of the Asia Missions Association, Seoul, Korea, 2026).

evaluate the behavior of others.⁴

- Diaspora: Meaning “a scattering,” this term describes the large-scale movement of people from their homeland to settle permanently or temporarily in other countries.⁵

4. Sherwood G. Lingenfelter and Marvin K. Mayers, *Ministering Cross-Culturally: An Incarnational Model for Personal Relationships* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 17-8.

5. Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization Issue Group No. 26 A and B: Diasporas and International Students. “Lausanne Occasional Paper 55: The New People Next Door.” In 2004 *Forum Occasional Papers*, (September 29-October 5, 2004), under “Lausanne Occasional Papers,” edited by David Clayton, 2005, <https://lausanne.org/occasional-paper/diasporas-and-international-stu->

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- Glocal: Global in scope but local in action and sequence,⁶ the seamless integration of the local and the global.⁷
- Mission: The spiritual (saving souls) and social (ushering in shalom) engagement of individual Christians and institutional churches in continuing and carrying out the missio Dei of the Triune God for redemption, reconciliation, and transformation.⁸
- Missions: The ways and means of accomplishing “the mission” entrusted by the Triune God to the Church and individual Christians.⁹
- Worldview: The fundamental cognitive, affective, and evaluative presuppositions a group of people hold about the nature of reality, which they use to order their lives.¹⁰

ASIAN DIASPORA MOVEMENTS

The United Nations estimates that there are approximately 281 million international migrants worldwide, accounting for about 3.6% of the global population. More than 40% of these migrants were born in Asia.¹¹ Indeed, Asia and the Pacific is the leading region of origin for international migrants, accounting for about one in three worldwide, with India, China, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, and the Philippines ranking among the top ten countries of origin. The region is also the destination for one in every six international migrants globally, 44% of whom are intraregional migrants. Additionally, it suffers the world’s highest share of internal displacements caused by natural disasters, mostly due to storms and floods.¹²

Regionally, since 2020, East Asia has overtaken Southeast Asia as the subregion with the largest number of international migrants. Meanwhile, South Asia has remained the main subregion of origin.¹³ Migrant workers play a vital role across various economic sectors, primarily in the service sector in Southeast Asia, East Asia, and the Pacific, as well as

in agriculture in South and Southwest Asia. Migrant women constitute the majority of the labor force in the service sectors of East Asia (75%) and Southeast Asia and the Pacific (73%).¹⁴

MISSIOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

Mission is in the heart of God and the work of the Triune God.¹⁵ The mission of the Kingdom emphasizes His role as Savior and Lord to establish Kingdom authority and governance.¹⁶ When we focus on the Kingdom, the Church becomes less cultural and missions goes glocal because the world has gone glocal.¹⁷

DIASPORA MISSIONS

We must think theologically, that is, to relate all our thinking to God, who is the sovereign power behind everything.¹⁸ It is God who controls movements of people, and utilizes them for His divine purposes.¹⁹–

Globalization shifts the traditional sense of missions from “going out” to the missions of “coming in”.²⁰ Glocalization means that global realities shape local contexts, just as the local context serves as a dimension of the global.

The Global and the local are deeply interdependent and, inextricably connected blurring traditional boundaries.²¹ Glocalization not only provides us with the diaspora missions opportunities to evangelize and disciple multi-ethnic diasporas who live in our community, but also links our local missions here with global ripple effects for missions in their homelands²² and beyond.

Diaspora missions is missions to every person everywhere outside His Kingdom, and utilizing a contextualized approach that integrates evangelism with social concern. This missions approach is deterritorialized and simultaneously local and global conceptually. In perspective, it is not geographically divided but borderless, transnational and global.²³

dents-the-new-people-next-door-top-55 (accessed March 16, 2026).

6. Enoch Wan, written comments on my dissertation first proposal draft, Portland, OR, December, 2017.

7. Bob Roberts Jr., *Glocalization: How Followers of Jesus Engage a Flat World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 24.

8. Enoch Wan, “‘Mission’ and ‘Missio Dei’: Response to Charles Van Engen’s ‘Mission Defined and Described,’” in *Mission-Shift: Global Mission Issues in the Third Millennium*, ed. David J. Hesselgrave and Ed Stetzer (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2010), 46.

9. Enoch Wan, “Rethinking Missiological Research Methodology: Exploring a New Direction,” *Global Missiology*, (October 2003), <http://www.enochwan.com/english/articles/pdf/Rethinking%20Missiological%20Research%20Methodology.pdf> (accessed February 11, 2026).

10. Paul G. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 15.

11. International Organization for Migration, “World Migration Report 2024.”

12. IOM, “Summary of the Report,” in *Asia-Pacific Migration Report 2025*.

13. IOM, “Migration Overview,” in *Asia-Pacific Migration Report 2025*, 2.

14. IOM, “Labour Migration,” in *Asia-Pacific Migration Report 2025*, 12-5.

15. David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (2014; repr., Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2014), 402.

16. Ralph D. Winter, “The Mission of the Kingdom,” in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*, ed. Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne, 4th ed. (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2009), 572.

17. Roberts, *Glocalization*, 29.

18. The Lausanne Covenant, *The Lausanne Legacy: Landmarks in Global Mission*, ed. Judith E. M. Cameron (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2016), 14.

19. Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization Issue Group No. 26 A and B, “Lausanne Occasional Paper 55.”

20. David J. Hesselgrave, *Paradigms in Conflict: 10 Key Questions in Christian Missions Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2005), 348.

21. Graham Hill, *Global Church: Reshaping Our Conversations, Renewing Our Mission, Revitalizing Our Churches* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 26-7.

22. Sadiri Joy Tira, “Glocal Evangelism: Jesus Christ, Magdalena, and Damascus in Greater Toronto Area,” *Lausanne World Pulse*, (June 2010), <http://www.lausanneworldpulse.com/perspectives-php/1291/06-2010> (accessed September 26, 2018).

23. Enoch Wan and Sadiri Joy Tira, “Diaspora Missiology and

Diaspora missiology is multi-directional and multi-dimensional.²⁴

Wan calls for action to engage in diaspora missions and to integrate “the Great Commission” with “the great commandment” relationally.²⁵ The relational realism paradigm is transculturally relevant as the majority of the world is highly relational, and it is effective in diaspora missions in need of Christian charity.²⁶

RELATIONAL REALISM PARADIGM

The relational concept of love is first towards God and secondly towards our neighbor. This is the essence of the biblical faith Jesus summarized in Matt. 22:37-40.²⁷ Wan proposes the relational realism paradigm by using a relational theology to connect our concept of the nature of God, humanity, the relationship between God, man and angels, and the practice of missions.

Relationship with God and Man

Our Christian spirituality is shaped around the truth our Triune God unveiled. He calls us to witness the Kingdom inaugurated in the incarnation of Jesus and the outpouring of the Spirit through our spirituality and discipleship. God invites us into His fellowship life,²⁸ as humans are created to be in a unique relationship with the Creator.²⁹ A Christian does not truly believe until he obeys; he is still being born again because his faith is dead (James 2:14-17).³⁰

The Church grows when we obey God’s commands; we cannot make the church grow by ourselves. His Kingdom grows by faith, not by force. Evangelism is the daily witness of every church member to their regular contacts.³¹ We need to get out of our Christian enclaves and develop authentic relationships with unbelievers.³²

Mission in the Context of the 21st Century,” *Global Missiology English* 1, no. 8 (October 2010), 4, under “Diaspora Studies,” <http://ojs.globalmissiology.org/index.php/english/article/viewFile/383/994> (accessed November 10, 2017).

24. Enoch Wan, “The Phenomenon of Diaspora: Missiological Implications for Christian Mission,” *Global Missiology English* 4, no. 9 (July 2012), under “Diaspora Study,” <http://ojs.globalmissiology.org/index.php/english/article/viewFile/1036/2415> (accessed February 16, 2026).

25. Enoch Wan, “Global People and Diaspora Missiology” (plenary paper presented at Tokyo 2010 Global Mission Conference, Japan, May 11-14, 2010), under “Conference Details,” http://tokyo2010.org/resources/Tokyo2010_Plenary_Enoch_Wan.pdf (accessed November 11, 2017).

26. Enoch Wan, “Relational Paradigm for Practicing Diaspora Missions in the 21st Century,” in Wan, 192.

27. Enoch Wan and Mark Hedinger, “Transformative Ministry for the Majority World Context: Applying Relational Approaches,” *Occasional Bulletin of EMS* 31, no. 2 (Spring 2018): 4.

28. Hill, *Global Church*, 414.

29. Arthur F. Glasser et al., *Announcing the Kingdom: The Story of God’s Mission in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 35.

30. George Patterson, *Church Planting Through Obedience Oriented Teaching* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1981), 10.

31. Patterson, *Church Planting Through Obedience Oriented Teaching*, 31.

32. Ben Pierce, “Connecting With the New Global Youth Culture: Jesus in an Age of Secularism, Relativism, and Tolerance,” *Lausanne Global Analysis* 8, no. 2 (March 2019). [https://www.lausanne.org/content/lga/2019-03/connecting-with-the-new-global-](https://www.lausanne.org/content/lga/2019-03/connecting-with-the-new-global-youth-culture)

Relationships with God, Man, and Other Spirits

Many people are spiritually blinded by Satan and evil spirits, preventing them from recognizing and worshipping the living God. The realities that the Apostle Paul faced regarding the existence of other gods and the phenomenon of idolatry are equally true for us today in mission education and practice.³³ While these spiritual forces are real to their worshippers, they are nothing in comparison to the Triune God. Out of deep compassion for people oppressed by evil powers, we engage in the spiritual warfare waged by God to glorify Him and bless those we are called to serve, just as Jesus did. Jesus fights for us.³⁴

God has already won the spiritual victory, but it is our responsibility to walk in the Spirit, and engage in spiritual disciplines and grow in maturity. We grow by the power of the Spirit first, and then by our actions.³⁵ The major concern of most people in the world is spiritual power. Through our close relationship with God, the freedom and experience from the power of the Spirit, and caring relationships with others, we are to communicate a powerful Christianity that God is love.³⁶

The approaches in diaspora missions are all relational in nature. Workers must see their diaspora missions from the Kingdom perspective and use that to expand His Kingdom. Wan writes that “a person with Kingdom-orientation is someone who embraces the perspective, sentiment, and motivation of the Kingdom at heart and in action.”³⁷

ASIAN CULTURES AND WORLDVIEWS IN BRIEF

Culture, defined by Howell and Paris, “is an idea created to describe a reality that people experience, the behaviors and assumptions common to a group that distinguish one group from others.”³⁸ Cultures help explain human similarities and differences, and there are collectivist and individualistic cultures in general.³⁹

People of all cultures take for granted the behavioral assumptions of the way of doing things and worldview, as the way the world operates.⁴⁰ We assume

youth-culture (accessed March 10, 2026).

33. Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 142.

34. Wright, *The Mission of God*, 178-9.

35. Enoch Wan, “Spiritual Warfare—What Chinese Christians Should Know And Do,” *First Evangelical Church Association Bulletin* [December 1999], <http://www.enochwan.com/english/articles/pdf/Spiritual%20Warfare%20What%20Chinese%20Christians%20Should%20Know.pdf> (accessed March 10, 2026).

36. Charles Kraft, *Worldview for Christian Witness*, (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2008), 504-5.

37. Wan, *Diaspora Missiology*, 198.

38. Brain M. Howell and Jenell Williams Paris, *Introducing Cultural Anthropology: A Christian Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 25.

39. Howell and Paris, *Introducing Cultural Anthropology*, 25.

40. Gary L. McIntosh and Alan McMahan, *Being the Church in a Multi-Ethnic Community: Why It Matters and How It Works*, (Indianapolis: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2012), 36.

that our culture is the only way to see and do things, and others will behave in accordance with our own values and rules. We cannot think of any other way of relating to people⁴¹ when we interact interculturally.⁴²

Worldview provides a systematic framework for cultural and social functions.⁴³ Because Asian and Majority World cultures are predominantly collectivist, they share distinct similarities in culture, leadership roles, social structures, and worldviews. They also place a high value on traditional knowledge and the concepts of honor and shame.⁴⁴

Similarities in Collectivist Cultures

In collectivist cultures, people behave politely, act in a socially desirable manner, respect others to maintain group welfare, unity, and harmony. They utilize a high context communication style, communicating indirectly with emphasis on nonverbal messages because nonverbal communication conveys more meaning than spoken words.⁴⁵ Group opinions and actions, and psychological closeness are emphasized in these cultures. Individual goals are coordinated with those of the collective, because group success is placed before individual credit or gain.⁴⁶ A person cannot think of existing separately from his group, or apart from his status or role.⁴⁷

The concept of “face,” whether “saving face,” or “losing face” is frequently characterized as an Asian preoccupation or social obsession. In reality, it is a universal human concern: people live not only by self-esteem but also by the esteem reflected back from others. Face-saving can be defined as a mutual process of maintaining dignity for all parties involved.⁴⁸

Asian cultures, also place a strong emphasis on fostering relationships through a gradual and in-depth process of interaction. This approach involves establishing a sense of comfort and mutual trust before engaging in business transactions or other formal interactions. Individuals frequently utilize personal networks as means to screening and selection criteria for relationship building. Thus, establishing, maintaining, and investing social time into personal

relationships represents the highest priority for many Asians. This framework values historical context, prefers gathering extensive information prior to decision-making, and favors a gradual approach that is inherently risk-averse.⁴⁹

Similarities in Worldviews

At the core of a culture lies its worldview, which dictates our general understanding of the nature of the universe and of our place within it.⁵⁰ When sharing the gospel, we first need to know what our worldview assumption is. The Western view of reality is divided into two categories. Religion deals with miracles and exceptions to the natural order, while science is based on experience, experimentation, and proof, seeking to establish natural laws. Unfortunately, Western theology and missions training often excludes the “middle level” of reality—the existence and activity of spirits—offering few answers for spiritual oppression or demonstrating the power of Christ to overcome it.⁵¹ Consequently, the Western gospel message frequently focuses narrowly on the future promise of eternal life.

In contrast, Asians and the Majority World live in communities bound together by ethical orders, shared historical narratives, and communal religious practices.⁵² In Hindu tradition and folk religions, adherents actively seek guidance, provision, and physical healing from visible and invisible powers⁵³ to resolve their immediate present day problems.

The early church in the Book of Acts expanded rapidly through two primary dynamics: encounters with truth and righteousness, and encounters with power and authority. These power encounters are pivotal to understanding the development and missional strategy of the first-century church.⁵⁴

We are called to proclaim the Gospel through relevant cultural forms; there is no room for cultural indifference in the Christian life. While all worldviews address beliefs, values, customs, and behaviors, not all elements of a culture are biblical. However, these cultural elements serve as vital points of contact to bridge Gospel communication within a person’s existing worldview. They provide a starting point that allows us to meet people where they are and gently guide them toward biblical truth.

We are called to proclaim the gospel through rele-

41. Judith E. Lingenfelter and Sherwood G. Lingenfelter, *Teaching Cross-Culturally: An Incarnational Model for Learning and Teaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 20.

42. Frank V. Eastham Jr., “Relational Training For a Multicultural Church,” in *Multicultural Ministry Handbook: Connecting Creatively to a Diverse World*, eds. David A. Anderson and Margarita R. Cabellon (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 39.

43. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 28-9.

44. Geert Hofstede, “The 6-D Model of National Culture,” under “Culture,” <https://geerthofstede.com/culture-geert-hofstede-gert-jan-hofstede/6d-model-of-national-culture/> (accessed February 23, 2026).

45. Judith N. Martin and Thomas K. Nakayama, eds., *Experiencing Intercultural Communication*. 4 ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2011), 195.

46. Juana Bordas, *Salsa, Soul And Spirit: Leadership for a Multicultural Age* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2007), 47-8.

47. Howell and Paris, *Introducing Cultural Anthropology*, 172.

48. David W. Augsburger, *Pastoral Counseling Across Cultures* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), 132-4.

49. Werner Mischke, Honor & Shame in *Cross-Cultural Relationships: Understanding Five Basic Culture Scales Through the Cultural Lens of Honor and Shame— with Application to Cross-Cultural Relationships and Partnerships* [May 2010], <https://werner-mischke.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Honor-and-shame-in-relationships-2023.pdf> (accessed March 16, 2026).

50. Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, “Lausanne Occasional Paper 2: The Willowbank Report: Consultation on Gospel and Culture,” January 13, 1978, under “Contextualization, Culture,”

<http://www.lausanne.org/content/lop/lop-2> (accessed March 16, 2026).

51. Paul G. Hiebert, “The Flaw of the Excluded Middle,” in *Missiology: The International Review* X, no. 1, (January, 1982), 43.

52. Howell and Paris, *Introducing Cultural Anthropology*, 198.

53. Hiebert, “The Flaw of the Excluded Middle,” 40-1.

54. Hesselgrave, *Paradigms in Conflict*, 168-9.

vant cultural forms,⁵⁵ there is no room for cultural indifference in our Christian life.⁵⁶ While all worldviews address beliefs, values, social customs, and behaviors, not all elements of a culture are biblical. However, these cultural elements serve as vital points of contact to bridge Gospel communication within a person's worldview and culture. They provide a starting point that allows us to meet people where they are, and gently guide them towards biblical truth.⁵⁷

Worldview Contextualization

When sharing the gospel, without contextualization, people will not connect to Jesus in a way that moves their hearts.⁵⁸ Wan defines contextualization as the “‘bridging of temporal-spatial-cultural gap’ in a micro-level or ‘the convergence of theoculture with homoculture’ on a macro level.” Christianity is the interaction of God, man, and Satan, and the salvation history is the progressive convergence of theoculture and homoculture.⁵⁹ Although worldviews are deeply hidden, they play a definitive role in contextualization; however, it is nearly impossible to define a single, uniform worldview for an entire society.⁶⁰ A powerful tool for discovering worldviews is to comparative cultural analysis - identifying matching or contrasting themes,⁶¹ to interpret a culture accurately.

Christians must intentionally interact with others different from themselves to build trust and rapport. Positive, transformative relationships occur only when both individuals feel safe and trusted. The ultimate goal is to understand your ministry focus group deeply, knowing who they are and how to pray for them. By living among them and committing to work alongside them, we can communicate the Gospel clearly, ensuring that the cross of Christ—rather than our cultural insensitivity—is the only obstacle to their faith.

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55. Bruce Riley Ashford, “The Gospel and Culture,” in *Theology and Practice of Mission: God, the Church, and the Nations*, ed. Bruce Riley Ashford, rev. ed. (Nashville: Academic, 2011), 119.

56. Ashford, *Theology and Practice of Mission*, 126-7.

57. Author unknown, “How to Exegete a Culture,” a class reading material, January, 2018.

58. Scot Moreau, Contextualization in *World Missions: Mapping and Assessing Evangelical Models* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2012), 18.

59. Enoch Wan, “The Theological Application of the Contextual—Interaction Model of Culture,” *His Dominion: A Bulletin of Canadian Theological College* 9, no. 1 (October, 1982).

60. Moreau, *Contextualization in World Missions*, 146-9.

61. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 103.

62. Eastham Jr., “Relational Training For a Multicultural Church,” 39.

63. Stephen A. Grunlan, and Marvin K. Mayers, *Cultural Anthropology: A Christian Perspective*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 196.

clearly, ensuring that the cross of Christ rather than our cultural insensitivity – is the only obstacle to their faith.⁶⁴

MY LEARNED LESSONS

I used to think that spending time building relationships and conversing with non-Christians without presenting the Gospel during the first encounter was merely practicing a “social gospel”. I believed that if my initial presentation was rejected, I should simply move on to the next target. However, once I changed my lens to a Kingdom perspective, I began to see that every individual is dearly loved by God, and that I am simply called to be His witness. People are deeply relational; they are not numbers in a religious marketing campaign. As a member of the Chinese diaspora, I have learned to utilize a relational approach to reaching other immigrants, particularly the Asian diaspora. Above all, I must allow the Holy Spirit to show me how and when to share the Gospel through cultural points of contact, leaving the work of transformation to Him.

Similar Asian cultural frameworks and worldviews have greatly helped me build trust with the Asian diaspora. Even when I do not fully understand a specific culture, God enables me to empathize with individuals, pray with them, and share Christ. Diasporas deeply need someone to listen to them and lighten their emotional burdens, and I have found that offers to pray in the name of Jesus are almost always welcomed.

For instance, an Indian bride who became depressed after moving to the U.S. frequently asked me to pray for her after witnessing how often Jesus answered my prayers on her behalf. Another Indian bride remarked that, unlike her family members who only pray for themselves at the Hindu temple, Christians actively pray for others. Similarly, a devoted Iranian Muslim woman would regularly wait for me to pray over her and her family, even though she insisted Jesus was merely a prophet. After praying, she often expressed that she felt her heavy burdens lifted.

Through these cross-cultural conversations, I have also learned that the color red holds deep spiritual significance in many Asian contexts, such as in Japan and Hinduism. This shared symbol can serve as a powerful point of contact to discuss the redeeming power of Jesus' blood to defeat evil and offer true freedom from the cycle of reincarnation. Ultimately, I am simply doing what the Lord requires: obeying His commands to love Him, loving my diverse neighbors, and letting God be God.

MISSIOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Based on these insights, I recommend engaging with the Asian diaspora first due to shared cultural and worldview commonalities, and subsequently expand-

64. Author unknown, “How to Exegete a Culture.”

ing outward to non-Asian diaspora communities to advance the Kingdom in diverse settings.

Let the Holy Spirit Do the Work

We must be willing to slow down and invest time in deep conversations with non-believers. This requires setting aside confrontational, direct Western evangelism methods and relearning how to navigate high-context, relational Asian communication styles. Most importantly, we must allow the Holy Spirit to perform the internal work of conversion. Furthermore, we must preserve and protect relationships even when an individual initially rejects the Gospel message. The Spirit will faithfully bear witness to Jesus when we witness in truth and love through the Scriptures (John 15:26).

Build Trust and Relationships

Mobilizing for diaspora missions relies on two core principles: every believer is called to love their neighbor, and this calling requires radical obedience born out of an intimate relationship with God. Overcoming our fear of differences through intentional cross-cultural interaction is essential to building trust. By loving our neighbors, we witness to a powerful, eternal God whose love spans the past, present, and future. This is fundamentally a spiritual warfare that can only be triumphed through the blood of the Lamb and the word of our testimony (Rev. 12:11).

Identify Points of Gospel Contact

We must ask the Holy Spirit for discernment, observation skills, and wisdom to locate redemptive points of contact within a culture. This requires patience, as understanding a person's underlying worldview takes time. While we need to be creative in our delivery, we must ensure our message remains strictly aligned with the Scriptures. God has sent us to love our neighbors, introduce them to Jesus, and invite them into His Kingdom (John 15:16).

CONCLUSION

The 10/40 Window encompasses nearly all of Asia, including roughly 70 countries and two-thirds of the world's population. Over 60% of individuals within this window live among unreached people groups. It is simultaneously home to the world's highest concentrations of poverty and the global heartlands of Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, making it the most challenging geographic frontier for Christian missions today.

Accordingly, the late Dr. Thomas Wang issued a powerful plea to the churches of Asia:

“Who will take up the final baton of world evangelization in this tough soil?

Who will run the race?... Many are praying and pondering whether God has entrusted this weighty and significant responsibility to the

churches in Asia... May the churches of Asia join hands in cooperation and take up the final link of the Gospel Ring. Through the mighty power of the Holy Spirit, they will complete the Ring until the Lord returns.”

May the Gospel go into Asia, be nurtured within Asia, and pour out of Asia to reach the ends of the earth through the power of Asian diaspora missions. Amen!

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Toward a Missional Approach to Children's Spiritual Formation and Discipleship in Filipino Local Churches

Nativity A. Petallar

I want to build a preschool for little children!" This was the exclamation of ten-year-old Rita (not her actual name) when I asked the children in a focus group discussion what they could do to help children in their neighborhood.¹ Another child blurted out, "I will share the Gospel with them!" Contrary to popular belief, children are not blind to the needs around them. If given the opportunity, they eagerly desire to be part of the solution to society's ills. Unfortunately, for many years, children have been treated as "passive" recipients of spiritual nurture, aid, and benefits from well-meaning adults, unconsciously denying the children their sense of agency. David Scott argues that "children have been part of the mission of the church since her earliest days, so it is inconceivable that the more recent history of research and scholarship related to mission should give so little attention to them."² In light of the child's developmental needs and capacities, I contend that children, whether Filipino, Asian, American, African, or any other nationality can be agents of change in their communities in their own way. They should be given a seat at the table. The Lausanne Consultation on Children at Risk in 2014 cautions: "The people of God are to respect, listen to, envision, and empower children as vulnerable agents of God's mission."³ However, when children are invited to be active agents in the *missio Dei*,⁴ there should be intentional ways of nurturing their spirituality.

This essay's overarching objective is to explore what it means to have a missional approach to discipleship so children can be agents of the *Missio Dei*, considering the cultural milieu of the Philippines. The corollary aims of this essay are twofold: (1) to examine the cultural backdrop of children in the

Philippine Context; and (2) to identify what it means to be missional in discipling children so they can be change agents and participants of the *missio Dei*.

THE CONTEXTUAL CHALLENGES OF CHILDREN IN THE PHILIPPINES NECESSITATING MISSIONAL DISCIPLESHIP

Filipinos in general have a positive view of children. For example, anthropologist, Landa Jocano stated that the majority of the Filipino people view children as *biyaya ng Diyos* (gifts from God).⁵ This view reflects the biblical view of the child (cf. Psalm 127:3). Furthermore, Tomas Andres, a Filipino intercultural consultant, explains that children are seen as signs of God's favor, the fulfillment of manhood and womanhood, and were gifts from above.⁶ These are manifestations of how Filipinos place a high value on children; however, the current challenges facing Filipino children seem to contradict such an ideal.

According to UNICEF, the Philippines has become a global epicenter of livestream sexual abuse.⁷ Additionally, the Philippines ranks second in Southeast Asia in terms of teenage pregnancy based on the Save the Children Global Childhood Report from 2019. An estimated 538 babies are born to Filipino teenage mothers "every single day," according to the Philippine Statistical Authority from 2017.⁸ According to UNICEF and local NGOs, there are approximately 250,000 street children in the Philippines. These children are typically found in densely populated urban areas such as Metro Manila, Cebu, and Davao, where they face various risks.⁹

It is an irony that the Philippines is considered the largest Christian nation in Asia. The Filipino religiosity does not seem to cohere with the actual lives of the people. This is the challenge facing the Christian church in the country. A missional approach to discipleship must consider the culture, the family situation, and the specific situation of the communities where children are located. Only then, can there be

5. F. Landa Jocano, *Slum as a Way of Life: A Study of Coping Behavior in an Urban Environment* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1975), 56.

6. Tomas Andres, *Negotiating of Filipino Values* (Manila: Divine Word Publications, 1992), 46.

7. World Hope International. "OSEC: A Modern Face of Human Trafficking," 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/report/philippines/osec-modern-face-human-trafficking>.

8. Philippines Orphanage Foundation, "Why So Many Orphans?" 2020, https://www.filipino-orphans.org/why-so-many-orphans-part-2/?gclid=CjwKCAjwgr6TBhAGeiwA3aVuIaoOTj4gHc9J6whqyd05b3uV9Lz-JbWWjrGX_OdISMy5p3ujmNfDERoCpBgQAvD_BwE.

9. ChildHope, "The Plight of Street Children in the Philippines: A Call for Intervention" (May 6, 2024), <https://childhope.org.ph/street-children-in-the-philippines/>.

1. I conducted a focus group discussion with eight six-to-twelve-year-old children at the First Free Methodist Church of Metro Manila on September 15, 2024 with Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from APNTS.

2. David H. Scott, "Where Are Children in Missiology? English-Language Publications over the Past Decades," *Mission Studies* 40 (2024): 211. Several missiologists and theologians have taken upon themselves the task of exploring the role of children in the *missio Dei*. Timpte observed that the exploration of children in biblical studies is minimal (see Katherine Joy Kihlstrom Timpte, *The Transformational Role of Discipleship in Mark 10:13-16: Passage Towards Childhood* (New York: T and T Clark, 2022)). 8. Fortunately, in the last ten years or so, the following scholars have published volumes of resources to add to the literature maintaining that children are important in the Mission of God: Bunge, Tan, White, Grobbelaar, Brewster, Lisa Miller, Berryman, Nye, Stonehouse, May, and others. In addition, *God's Heart for Children* explores the theological implications and practical realities of ministry to, for, and with children written by over twenty contributors, mostly from the Global South.

3. Segura-April et al., "Mission with Children at Risk - Lausanne Movement," n.p., accessed September 23, 2024, <https://lausanne.org/occasional-paper/mission-children-risk-lop-66>.

4. This paper does not explicitly identify specific ways in which children can be engaged in missions activities. I would let the readers of the paper determine that in light of their own contexts.

effective strategies not just for the children but also for their families. The current moral state of children, youth, and families is a cause for alarm and one of the most powerful forces to counter this is the family in collaboration with the church.

WHAT IS CHILDREN'S SPIRITUALITY AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?¹⁰

Rebecca Nye defines children's spirituality as "God's ways of being with children and children's ways of being with God."¹¹ This definition portrays the relational dynamic between God and the child. Why is spirituality essential? Experts on children's spirituality convey that children are as much spiritual beings as are the adults in their lives.¹² In essence, spirituality is the person's capacity and yearning for relationship, that is, for a divine or transcendent being, someone "wholly" other than one's self. If children are to be active agents in God's mission, their spirituality must remain centered on Jesus, the Mission Giver, who calls and empowers them.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE MISSIONAL IN APPROACH TO DISCIPLING CHILDREN?-

In his reflections on childhood, Karl Rahner writes, "[W]hat is already present in the child has still to be realized, to become actual in experience."¹³ He uses the language of the "already and not yet." By this he means that when a child is born into this world, he already is the "man," whole, a full human being but still has a lot of things to learn. This idea presupposes that the adults around the child have a teaching and nurturing role. To disciple a child is to teach her.¹⁴ To be a disciple means to be a learner.

Scottie May offers a profound statement on how adults should teach children. She states, "In addition to teaching content to children and crafting engaging and age-appropriate lessons that are specifically for children, we must walk with children in their discipleship journey."¹⁵ The Lausanne Movement also has an emphasis on ministry to, for, and with children.¹⁶ This is realized when adults in the lives of children

do ministry to them, act as advocates for their welfare, and engage in God's ministry with them.

Figure 1 below shows how three areas relate to a missional approach to children's discipleship. I will limit my discussion on the following: to be missional is to first, be consciously aware of the *missio Dei*-to reconcile the world through Jesus;¹⁷ second, be intentional in purpose: Thus, the purpose of discipleship so that children's spiritual formation could be nurtured could focus on the following: (a) evangelism; (b) worship; (c) doctrine; (d) holism; and (e) relevance to the culture; and third, to be outreach oriented.¹⁸



Figure 1. Marks of A Missional Approach to Discipling Children¹⁹

To Be Missional is to be Consciously Aware of the *Missio Dei*

Some thirty years ago, the term missional was introduced to the North American Church through the publication of the book *Missional Church*. Guder emphasized the "essential nature and vocation of the church as God's called and sent people."²⁰ The mission of the Church begins with God who is the author of the mission. Timothy Tennent reiterates that "missions should never be conceptualized apart from the *missio Dei*."²¹ There is no mission without God. In like manner, there is no children's discipleship without acknowledging that only the Holy Spirit can move in the hearts of young boys and girls, so they grow in the

10. This section is adapted from Nativity Petallar, "Practical Ways of Nurturing Children's Spirituality," in *A Plain Account of Christian Spirituality: In Honor of Floyd T. Cunningham*, David Ackerman ed. (Global Nazarene Publications, 2023), 189-212.

11. Nye, 5.

12. Donald Ratcliff with Scottie May, *Children's Spirituality: Christian Perspectives, Research, and Applications* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2004), 7.

13. Karl Rahner, "Ideas for a Theology of Childhood," in *Theological Investigations, vol. 8: Further Theology of the Spiritual Life II*, trans. David Bourke (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971), 38-39.

14. For pronouns referring to a child, I would vary the gender forms for ease of exposition.

15. Scottie May, "What Have We Learned? Seventy-Five Years of Children's Evangelical Spiritual Formation," in *Bridging Theory and Practice in Children's Spirituality: New Directions for Education, Ministry, and Discipleship*, eds. Mimi L. Larson, Robert J. Keeley, and Zondervan (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2020), 21-38.

16. Desiree Segura-April et al., "Mission with Children at Risk," *Lausanne Occasional Paper*, 2014, <https://lausanne.org/occasional-paper/mission-children-risk-lop-66>.

17. This is what Zscheile mentioned in his definition of "missional" (see Zscheile, *Missional Spiritual Formation*, xiii).

18. These areas are based on the following: feedback that I got during my topic presentation at Fuller Theological Seminary last August 7, 2024, reviewing sources dealing with missional theology among others, as well as the response of my colleagues from AP-NTS when I asked for their opinion on what does "missional" mean.

19. This diagram is simply a conceptualization of a missional approach to children's discipleship. In no certain terms am I stating that this is a framework set in stone or contains everything the term "missional" encompasses. There are other marks of a missional approach, and those who want to follow through on this research may add to these areas.

20. Darrell Guder, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 11. Banseok Cho, *Being Missional, Becoming Missional: A Biblical-Theological Study of the Missional Conversion of the Church*. Pickwick Publications, 2021.

21. Timothy Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions: A Trinitarian Missiology for the Twenty-First Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 59.

knowledge of God and become salt and light in their communities.

The following section deals with how a missional approach to children's discipleship looks like.

To Be Missional is to be Intentional in Its Discipleship and Spiritual Formation Approaches

The 19th-century Presbyterian theologian Robert Lewis Dabney summarizes teaching children in the ways of God in a very powerful way. He writes:

*The education of children for God is the most important business done on earth. It is the one business for which the earth exists. . . . Train up him who is now a boy for Christ, and you not only sanctify that soul, but you set on foot the best earthly agencies to redeem the whole broadening stream of human beings who shall proceed from him, down to the time when men cease to marry and give in marriage*²²

Dabney's thoughts are such a powerful challenge to walk alongside children in their growth toward the fullness of life! He also challenges parents to educate children and consider this as "their primary task on earth."²³ The education of young boys and girls affect the future of humanity.

Children Need to Have a Personal Relationship with Jesus

Children's spiritual formation starts with a relationship with Jesus. The teaching of the church should be evangelistic in nature. Erickson states that "the church has four main functions: evangelism, edification, worship, and social concern."²⁴ Evangelism is not just for adults. Children, too, need to know the Gospel of Christ. Kolk documents that "Discipleship begins with evangelism. In order to be a disciple of Christ, one must first have a relationship with Jesus Christ."²⁵

To know Jesus in a personal way and walk in His ways is a child's privilege and probably the most important decision she can make in her life. This is where discipleship comes in. The adults who are surrounding the children in church should have a nurturing stance. With this supportive community around the child, it would not be hard to allow children to take part in age-appropriate mission initiatives of the church.

Engaging Children in Worship is an Expression of their Relationship and Obedience to God

When a child receives Christ as his personal Lord and

Savior, worship is the outflow of that commitment. To worship is to acknowledge the greatness of God and to obey Him. This is one of the emphases of Deuteronomy 6:1-2. MacArthur comments, "God is clear that each generation has a responsibility to teach their children and grandchildren. Specifically, God's people are responsible to teach their offspring to . . . live faithfully according to His Word."²⁶ This is one of the ways to pass on the faith to the next generation. One of Lausanne Movement's Call to Action for Children-At Risk says: "Children can be active participants in worship and service to God."²⁷ Children can worship God not just in the church, but in their homes, their schools, and practically wherever they are. Obeying God is intrinsic to worship. Knowing God and the Bible is important. But obedience is the result to knowledge.

CHILDREN NEED TO UNDERSTAND CHURCH DOCTRINE AND AVENUES FOR SPIRITUAL FORMATION

Teaching of doctrine alone does not lead to a healthy spiritual thriving. The learners should have a personal relationship with God first and then church teachings follow. One of the necessary elements of the discipleship journey is the presence of the mentor. Gerhardsson writes, "To learn one must go to a Teacher. . . . But they also learn a great deal by simply observing; with attentive eyes they observe all that the teacher does and then proceed to imitate him."²⁸ This is a tall order for the mentor. Inside and outside the walls of the church, the mentor needs to live a holy life. In the ministry of Jesus with His disciples, He showed the example of a perfect mentor. A mentor and a nurturing church family could accomplish this. To be able to participate in the mission Dei, children need mentors who will walk alongside them in serving the Lord.

A Holistic Approach to Meeting Children's Needs Towards Missional Discipleship

A missional approach to children's discipleship should be holistic—targeting to meet the various developmental needs, viz. mental, socio-emotional, physical, moral, and spiritual. Other scholars call it "integration."

In one of Barna's studies, he concluded: "The most important dimension of our lives, therefore, is the spiritual dimension."²⁹ This understanding is also expressed in Greener's exposition of child development with spirituality as the center. Greener expounds, "From the Christian perspective, spiritual development is unique among developmental

22. Robert Lewis Dabney, *Discussions: Evangelical and Theological* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1982), 691–92.

23. *Ibid.* 691.

24. Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 1060. In the framework: worship, edification (instruction or doctrine), worship, and social concern (outreach-oriented)."

25. Jeffrey Gavin Kolk, "Moving Good News Club Children Beyond Conversion to Obedient Biblical Discipleship" (DMin diss, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2013), 31.

26. MacArthur, 6.

27. Segura-April et al., "Mission with Children at Risk - Lausanne Movement," n.p.

28. B. Gerhardsson, *The Origins of the Gospel Tradition* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1979), 17; cited in Ogden, 83-84.

29. George Barna, *Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2003), 55.

areas because it provides the epicenter that anchors the remainder of human development.”³⁰ Greener argues that “No one person, church, or program can accomplish everything that children . . . need holistically. Nevertheless, a mindset of holism must pervade our thinking.”³¹ Everyone is invited to participate in this endeavor of discipling children. John Roberto suggested that we need the following environments for children’s growth: the faith community, the family, and age groups—by (1) engaging children in intergenerational relationships, activities and church life and events; (2) equipping and supporting parents and families in sharing and practicing their faith at home, and (3) engaging young people in activities and experiences designed in ways they learn and grow.³² Doing ministries to, for, and with children with the view of meeting their holistic needs is a pathway towards missional discipleship.

Relevance to Culture and Daily Lives of Children is Key to Life Application

Filipino theologian Rodrigo D. Tano calls church leaders to understand and communicate the Christian faith in ways that are intelligible and relevant to the culture.³³ Another call to present the Gospel with the context in view is the statement of noted Filipino social anthropologist Melba P. Maggay. She exhorts against preaching without knowing the needs of our audience by saying, “With easy confidence we proceed with our one-two-three point formulation, sidestepping the differences between a full and a hungry stomach.”³⁴ Reflecting on these real issues, many teachers of children could be guilty of overlooking the needs and particular characteristics of their audience in the guise of dedicated ministry. Logan and Ridley, wrote that “by listening to the Holy Spirit, we too can discern what each person needs.”³⁵ Sensitivity to the Spirit’s leading is essential if one desires to be relevant in the life of a child. When inviting children to participate in the *missio Dei*, we must prioritize their developmental needs and provide intentional training, ensuring that their involvement is never coercive or haphazard.

TO BE MISSIONAL IS TO BE OUTREACH-ORIENTED

Floyd T. Cunningham, the resident church historian of the Asia-Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary

(APNTS) believes that “to be missional is to be outward looking.”³⁶ The outreach dimension to nurturing children is encouraging children to become salt and light in their communities. But this should be done in such a way that children will not be abused spiritually in the process. There should be “culture-sensitive evangelism.” Coercion or other forms of deceit or manipulation should have no place in the presentation of the Gospel.

Scott observed that there is an “ethical dilemma” of evangelism or mission with children.³⁷ There is a challenge of evangelism on children’s freedom to choose. To respond to this dilemma, I use Elmer Thiessen’s explanation of this. For some reason, Thiessen writes that he is using, “evangelism, or missions, or the making of religious converts, as synonymous for religious proselytizing.”³⁸ Thiessen defines proselytizing as the “deliberate attempt of a person or organization, through communication, to bring about the conversion of another person or a group of persons, where conversion is understood to involve a change of a person’s belief, behavior, identity, and belonging.”³⁹ His idea was if we care about the welfare of others, then we want to share with them the good news that we have found; however, Thiessen also says that, “Clearly, like many other things that are in themselves good, proselytizing can become bad if it is abused. And, as is well known, the higher the good, the greater the danger of abuse.”⁴⁰ This is specifically important when ministering to, for, and with children because they are vulnerable and would likely be victims of abuse if church leaders are not careful.

Kevin Lawson recommended a ministry “by” children. He notes that “One mistake sometimes made is thinking of children only as recipients of the ministry and guidance of their parents and the church rather than realizing that they too can minister to others.”⁴¹ Lawson enumerated some reasons why children need to be given opportunities to participate in the outreach efforts of the church:

First, by participating, they might experience and understand the meaning of compassionate service. Second, they need to see how God has personally gifted them and how he can use them to serve others. Third, such activities help them to see beyond themselves. Fourth, helping kids take responsibility for planning and carrying out their own ministries encourages

30. Greener, n.p.

31. Ibid.

32. John Roberto, “Faith-Forming Environments for Children,” in *Bridging Theory and Practice in Children’s Spirituality: New Directions for Education, Ministry, and Discipleship*, eds. Mimi L. Larson, Robert J. Keeley, and Zondervan (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2020), 89.

33. Rodrigo Tano, *Theology in the Philippine Setting: A Study in the Contextualization of Theology* (Quezon City: New Day, 1981), 82.

34. Melba Maggay, *The Gospel in Filipino Context* (Manila: OMF, 1978), 1.

35. Robert E. Logan and Charles R. Ridley, *The Discipleship Difference: Making Disciples While Growing As Disciples* (N.p.: Logan Leadership, 2015), 19.

36. Floyd T. Cunningham, personal correspondence with author, August 6, 2024.

37. Initial paper presentation at Fuller on August 7, 2024.

38. Elmer Thiessen, *The Ethics of Evangelism: A Philosophical Defence of Ethical Proselytizing and Persuasion* (London: Pater-noster, 2011), 9.

39. Thiessen, 11.

40. Thiessen, 88. Thiessen provides a summary of 15 criteria to distinguish between ethical and unethical proselytizing (Thiessen, 234-37).

41. Kevin Lawson, “Welcoming Children,” in *Infants and Children in the Church: Five Views on Theology and Ministry*, eds. Adam Harwood and Kevin Lawson (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2017), 204.

the growth of their leadership skills, instills in them a sense of responsibility. Finally, participating in outreach projects shape and nurture life-long love and service to God and others.⁴²

I agree to all these reasons, but I want to emphasize that planning these things need careful preparation, training for teachers, and a culture of respect for children's freedom to choose. Anthony and Marshman wrote, "When children and students are challenged to step out of their comfort zones from an early age, they experience a dependence on the Spirit to equip and strengthen them beyond their nature and desires."⁴³ All these notions are ideal and are wonderful concepts, but the Church needs to spend time listening to the Holy Spirit for guidance and should carefully strategize before letting children participate in mission projects.

CONCLUSION

Children are part of God's overall plan. God's mission is to save the world through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The Lord has invited the Church to participate in His grand plan. Both adults and children can be agents of mission. In the introduction, "I want to build a preschool for children," was the excited comment of 10-year-old Rita. Children can participate in God's mission, and that means that the adults around them have a missional challenge to disciple them in the knowledge of the Lord so they can grow spiritually and can be change agents in their communities.

A brief situational analysis of the current challenges of the children in the Philippines has resulted in a rather bleak landscape showing sexual exploitation, teenage pregnancy, risky situations for street children, and mental health issues. I am sure there are good things that are happening in local churches with their ministries to, for, and with children; however, these societal ills call for a concerted effort to nurture children. One of the things that the church can do is to disciple the children so their spiritual formation takes them to a good path, as espoused by Miller⁴⁴ in her research; and then these children can go out and become change agents in their own communities.

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⁴² Lawson, 204.

⁴³ Michelle Anthony and Megan Marshman, *7 Family Ministry Essentials: A Strategy for Culture Change in Children's and Student Ministries* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2015), 30–31.

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Relational Communication and the Use and Misuse of AI

Enoch Wan, Karen Hedinger, Mark Hedinger

ABSTRACT

This edition of the Asia Missions Association focuses on mission trends in the world today. One of the overarching themes of our day is the presence of Large Language Models (LLMs) as a form of Artificial Intelligence (AI). This article will look at the use/misuse of AI in light of Christian mission's focus on the communication of the Word of God.

INTRODUCTION

The mission of God (*missio Dei*) regarding this world is highly connected with communication. The people of God are called to teach (Matthew 28:20), and to reprove, rebuke and exhort (2 Tim 4:2). The narrative examples of the Book of Acts point us to teaching in homes and in public (Acts 20:20). Jesus was known for His teaching (John 13:13), and for the gracious words that fell from His lips (Luke 4:2). Perhaps most importantly for us, Jesus' words were "Spirit and life" (John 6:63).

The missio Dei is tightly connected with the idea of communication. Yet we also experience the reality that communication is not all God-honoring. We must use care to avoid "any unwholesome talk" (Ephesians 4:29). Peter warns against false teachers who will introduce destructive heresies and will exploit Christians with "fabricated stories" (2 Peter 2:1-3).

Communication, in short, can be God-honoring and approached in ways that honor God and spread His truth. Communication can also be misused for private gain and to spread harmful half-truths or untruths. Communication can be aimed at that which builds up in truth (Ephesians 4:29); yet it can also be aimed at "fabricated stories."

A new element has entered the realm of human communication – the technology we call Artificial Intelligence (AI). In this article we explore the theological and missional impacts of generative AI, from now on referred to as AI, on our view of Christian communication. We will do this by first examining the nature of communication. We will then consider the nature of AI. With those foundations in place, we will consider the use/misuse of AI in several aspects of Christian ministry and mission. Finally, the article will end with a practical application of wise and unwise uses of this growing technology.

DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS

Artificial Intelligence (AI)

Artificial Intelligence in this paper refers to computer

systems that can perform tasks traditionally associated with human intelligence including (but not limited to) processing language, identifying patterns, recognizing visual inputs, making data-driven predictions and engaging in problem solving activities¹. Our use of the phrase "Artificial Intelligence" specifically refers to generative artificial intelligence that is based on and trained on large language models (LLMs).

Relational Communication:

Relational Communication is the relational process between two or more beings/Beings of creating and interpreting messages that seek to elicit a response which includes both horizontal and vertical interactions that occur between the varied patterns of life displayed by people of either the same or different cultural groups.

THE NATURE OF COMMUNICATION IS RELATIONAL AND INTERACTIVE

Communication is a wide field, ranging from topics like technical writing and mass media on one hand to interpersonal and intercultural communication on the other. From a Christian perspective, our focus is on the relational nature of communication. Communication is not simply information dispersion; it reflects the interactions that occur between God and people and between individuals.

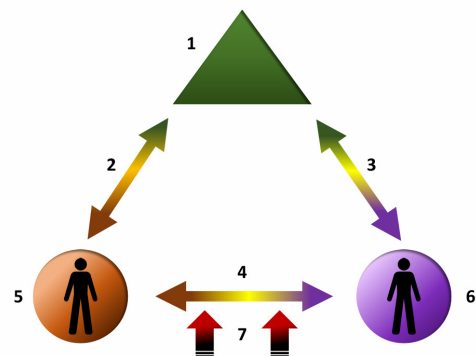


Figure 1: Relationships within Intercultural Ministry²

Figure 1 graphically demonstrates the relational world in which we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28). The Triune God is relational within Himself – Father, Son and Spirit who abide with one another. This Triune God has been aware of and in contact with every person alive, even if the people are

1. Thomas E. Phillips, *AI for Theological Education* (Digital Theological Library, 2025), 6.

2. Updated version of figure from: Enoch Wan and Mark Hedinger, *Relational Missionary Training*, Urban Ministry in the 21st Century (Skycrest, CA: Urban Loft Publishers, 2017), 41.

not aware of His presence. We call that level of God/human relationship “vertical.”

There is also horizontal communication between people. This is the focus of virtually all communication science, given that communication science is typically agnostic about any deity except as indicative of worldview-level beliefs. Horizontal communication apart from God most often focuses on either the message, the sender, or the receiver. The paragraphs below will give a brief overview of these three perspectives.

Some forms of communication see the message as central. This approach might focus on word choices from a dictionary or grammatical view. Researchers might be most interested in the communication value of a film based on studies that show the overall impact of visual, auditory, and narrative elements. Those communication approaches are “message-focused” and only consider the sender or receiver in terms of their expected response to the message.

Sender focused communication understands communication from the perspective of the sender of the message. Communication from this perspective seeks to make the sender known – their thoughts, personal habits, experiences etc.

Yet another approach is to focus on the receiver. What is that person’s – or those persons’ – deepest fears or wishes? Communication can be focused on those fears and wishes in order to encourage a favorable reception to the message. “Seeker friendly” messaging and advertising companies often communicate from this perspective.

In contrast to a pure message/sender/receiver focus (which is strictly horizontal), our view of relational communication integrates vertical and horizontal communication within the context of interactions. This integrationist approach includes God as Source of His Message as well as being present in all human endeavors. Our relational interactionist approach focuses on the interactions between the message/sender/receiver rather than on the characteristics of any one of those three in isolation. In the following paragraphs we will unfold a model of communication that includes vertical and horizontal relational interactions.

Elements of Communication

Rather than look at the message, the sender or the receiver in isolation, we want to see the interactions that exist between the Beings/beings who are involved in communication. The material below is a summary of the much more extensive treatment of the elements of communication found in *Relational Intercultural Communication for Relational Intercultural Education* (Wan and Hedinger, 2025).³ The reader is encouraged to see that publication for a more complete view of the multiple elements that make up communication.

3. Enoch Wan and Mark Hedinger, *Relational Intercultural Communication for Relational Intercultural Education*, Relational (Western Academic Publishers, 2025).

Vertically - Genuine Connection That Includes Triune God. God intends for people to be in communication with Him. He gave us prayer as a way for humans to approach God, and He sent His Word to communicate with us. Another example of vertical communication is that Jesus is “the Word that became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14) – not just sending a message, but becoming the Message.

Horizontally/Interpersonally - Genuine Connection Between Individual People

Our model of communication helps us describe the genuine connections that can occur between people. Those horizontal, person-to-person interactions include the ways that two people perceive one another, what they think about each other, how they interpret the messages sent by the other, and the level of will (volition) that they have for interacting together. Within that cycle, there is content (the message itself), a sender (who first expresses) and a receiver (who perceives and then – conceives its meaning).

Horizontally/Organizationally - Genuine Connection Between People Within Organizational Structure

Vertical and horizontal communication takes place in organizations as well as within interpersonal relationships. For example, a manager and his/her subordinate must communicate. How they do that will include some elements that are similar to interpersonal communication but will also include elements that are unique to organizations. For example, social science talks of “power distance⁴” as a description of the expected interaction between people at two different levels within an organization.

This “power distance” example is just one of many factors that exist in organizational communication, but which are less prevalent (though still a reality) in interpersonal terms. For our purposes, the point is that organizational communication, like interpersonal communication, can be appropriately described as integrated (vertical and horizontal) and interactionist (it is the interaction which we keep in view, not a static view of communication that is solely “message” or “sender” or “receiver” oriented).

Horizontal/Mass Media - Genuine Connection by Graphic or Audio or Print

Communication is also interactive even though it includes the mass distribution of print or digital or video presentations. The use of mass media does not change the model from vertical and horizontal relational interactions. It simply makes the pool of people interacting much larger.

Each person who is consuming that media is still individually involved, even if there is also corporate involvement. Each person still has the volitional abil-

4. Geert Hofstede, Gert Jan Hofstede, and Michael Minkov, *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*, Third Edition, 3 edition (New York: McGraw-Hill Education, 2010).

ity to interact or not. Each person still has the need to think about the message and then decide how to react/respond.

Figure 2 summarizes our model of integrated interactive communication. The different issues identified in Figure 2 will later be used to analyze the uses and misuses of AI technologies.

Dimension	Definition	Basis	Accountability
Vertical	God to man	Man made in God's image	Every careless word will be judged (Matt 12:36)
Vertical	Man to God	Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind (Matt 22:37) – prayer, worship, obedience	Depart from Me - I never knew you (Matthew 7:21-23)
Horizontal	Man to man interpersonal	Love your neighbor as yourself	Good Samaritan story – your neighbor is any person you are near (Luke 10:25-37)
Horizontal	Man to man organizationally	Not as the world's leaders who lord it over one another (Matt 20:20-28)	The greatest must be the servant (Matt 20:20-28)
Horizontal	Man to man Mass media	Foundation of godly communication is a relationship with God that is shared by multitudes.	Rev 5:9, 7:9 people of every tribe, tongue, nation will be gathered for Jesus' glory

Figure 2: Integrated interactive communication model

RELATIONAL COMMUNICATION AND THE USE/MISUSE OF AI

Explanation: the Nature of AI

The AI being discussed in this article is generative artificial intelligence that is based on and trained on large language models (LLMs). Thomas Phillips in his book, *AI for Theological Education*, defines AI as follows.

Artificial Intelligence refers broadly to the development of computer systems that can perform tasks traditionally associated with human intelligence. These tasks include processing language, identifying patterns, recognizing visual inputs, making data-driven predictions, and engaging in problem-solving activities. While the phrase "artificial intelligence" may evoke images of sentient machines or human-like robots, contemporary AI systems do not possess consciousness, self-awareness, or intention. Rather, they simulate aspects of cognition through statistical modeling and computational power. They are tools – albeit extraordinarily powerful ones – that can emulate certain forms of learning, reasoning, and language generation.⁵

Phillips then explains a significant difference in AI from previous computer capabilities.

"Among the most significant developments in the contemporary landscape of AI is the rise of machine learning. Machine learning involves the use of algorithms that enable computers to detect patterns and improve their performance on specific tasks through exposure to data. Rather than following a rigid, preprogrammed set of instructions, machine learning systems adapt based on the information they process." One particular form of machine learning – known as deep learning – relies on artificial neural networks, which are loosely inspired by the structure of the human brain. These networks consist of layers of interconnected nodes through which data flows and is transformed, allowing the system to make increasingly accurate predictions or classifications."⁶

Phillips goes on to describe the development of Natural Language Processing (NLP), "which focuses on enabling computers to understand, interpret, and generate human language," and "can generate coherent and contextually responsive text across a wide variety of topics. These generative models have become particularly influential in educational contexts, where they are used for content creation, language instruction, writing support, and administrative tasks."⁷

It is the combination of information processing and NLP that produces research findings by generative AI and often states those findings in correct grammatical, even natural sounding, language. The findings might be accurate, but the way they are generated is by probability, not human thinking. This means "that AI can give the appearance of being the source of knowledge (ontology) and the repository of knowledge (epistemology) and demonstrate this through seemingly coherent communication."⁸ Emily Bender, from the University of Washington warns us about this.

Text generated by an LM is not grounded in communicative intent, any model of the world, or any model of the reader's state of mind. It can't have been, because the training data never included sharing thoughts with a listener, nor does the machine have the ability to do that. This can seem counter-intuitive given the increasingly fluent qualities of automatically generated text, but we have to account for the fact that our perception of natural language text, regardless of how it was generated, is mediated by our own linguistic competence and our predisposition to interpret communicative acts as conveying coherent meaning and intent, whether or not they do. ... Contrary to how it may seem when we observe its output, an LM is a system for haphazardly stitching together sequences of linguistic forms it has observed in its vast training data, according to probabilistic information about how they combine, but without any reference to meaning: a stochastic parrot.⁹

6. Phillips, *AI for Theological Education*, 6.

7. Phillips, *AI for Theological Education*, 6–7.

8. Karen Hedinger, "In the Image of God and in the Image of Man," Unpublished, April 2026, 12.

9. Emily M. Bender and Timnit Gebru, "On the Dangers of

5. Thomas E. Phillips, *AI for Theological Education* (Digital Theological Library, 2025), 6.

How does this information relate to communication? AI can only receive and express according to probability based on its training data. In addition, there is no vertical interaction between AI and God. AI is created in the image of man, and humans in the image of God. With the advance of NLP, responses from AI look like genuine interactive communication with a human being, but they are not.

Does this mean that AI should be avoided completely? No. That would be almost impossible, and there are great benefits to using it in controlled ways as an assistant with human discernment. Below, we will briefly look at strengths, weaknesses, use, and misuse in the communication process.

STRENGTHS WHEN USED FOR MISSIOLOGICAL COMMUNICATION

AI Finds Patterns

Walker Tzeng, in an article¹⁰ based on his dissertation, identified three ways that AI excelled in producing theological material.

The most striking strength of AI in generating theological text is its speed and efficiency. Human theologians may spend years studying centuries of writings, doctrinal treatises, and commentaries, carefully cross-referencing insights across traditions and languages. AI, by contrast, processes vast corpora in seconds, retrieving, categorizing, and summarizing theological arguments from multiple cultures and historical periods with remarkable consistency.

*A second strength is AI's analytical precision in synthesizing theological text by recognizing patterns across diverse theological traditions. Its ability to identify doctrinal consistencies, thematic links, and historical developments with speed and accuracy allows for connections that human theologians might overlook. Finally, AI contributes to the structuring and refinement of theological ideas through consistent analytical support. It can generate alternative frameworks, propose counterarguments, and provide comparative perspectives at a pace that keeps scholarly reflection dynamic and iterative.*¹¹

AI Is a Research Assistant that Finds Information Quickly

AI can be used to find research sources quickly and from a vast amount of data that it has been trained on. In the past, that kind of research was done primarily in a library with the sources available. As search engines like Google advanced, additional research could be done on Google Scholar. Now AI platforms can conduct searches for sources based on the researcher's prompts, identifying sources from around the world that the researcher might never have found

Stochastic Parrots: Can Language Models Be Too Big?," 2021, 616–17, <https://doi.org/10.1145/3442188.3445922>.

10. Walker Tzeng, *Can AI 'Know' God? A Comparative Study of Generative AI and Human Theology*, n.d., <https://wetia.org/>.

11. Tzeng, *Can AI 'Know' God? A Comparative Study of Generative AI and Human Theology*, 6–7.

otherwise.

However, this ability to find sources is where additional research and discernment are warranted. AI can hallucinate and generate sources, quotes, etc. that do not really exist. Steven Rosenbaum, the author of *The Future of Truth* found out about fake quotes the hard way.

The author of a nonfiction book about the effects of artificial intelligence on truth acknowledged on Monday that he had included numerous made-up or misattributed quotes concocted by A.I.

The author, Steven Rosenbaum, whose book "The Future of Truth" was released this month to great fanfare, incorporated more than a half-dozen misattributed or fake quotes in sections of the book reviewed by The New York Times.

The Times asked Mr. Rosenbaum about the quotes on Sunday and Monday. On Monday night, Mr. Rosenbaum acknowledged in a statement that the book had "a handful of improperly attributed or synthetic quotes" and said that he had started his own investigation.

*He said that the inclusion of the incorrect quotes was an accident and that he had "no intention of fabricating any viewpoints" while writing the book.*¹²

Students in the intercultural doctoral programs at Western Seminary in Portland, Oregon, are permitted to use AI to identify sources for their areas of research. Once they find sources, though, they have to find the original source and read it in its entirety, making sure that the information they use and quote is directly from the original source and not taken out of context as AI can do.

AI Can Generate Attractive, Creative Presentations

There are many AI platforms that can take the information a person wants to present and create stunning presentations in Power Point, brochures, flyers, podcasts, etc. Presenters need to realize, though, that what they share on public AI platforms becomes part of the training data and becomes publicly available for anyone to access.

WEAKNESSES WHEN USED FOR MISSIOLOGICAL COMMUNICATION

AI Is Normed on An Audience

AI is trained on the data that is supplied to it. Several experts have expressed the risks of bias and systematic underrepresentation of entire groups.

Just as environmental impact scales with model size, so does the difficulty of understanding what is in the training data. In §4, we discuss how large datasets based on texts from the Internet overrepresent hegemonic viewpoints and encode biases potentially damaging to marginalized populations. In collecting ever larger datasets we risk incurring documentation debt. We recommend mitigating these risks by

12. Benjamin Mullin, "Book on Truth in the Age of A.I. Contains Quotes Made Up by A.I.," *The New York Times*, May 19, 2026.

*budgeting for curation and documentation at the start of a project and only creating datasets as large as can be sufficiently documented.*¹³

The I2Group has also included this issue in their webpage article, "The 10 Biggest Issues Facing Natural Language Processing."¹⁴ Issue #6 is quoted below.

6. Innate biases: In some cases, NLP tools can carry the biases of their programmers, as well as biases within the data sets used to train them. Depending on the application, an NLP could exploit and/or reinforce certain societal biases, or may provide a better experience to certain types of users over others. It's challenging to make a system that works equally well in all situations, with all people.

AI is not a Spiritual being – not indwelt by the Spirit, and has the appearance of power but lacks the reality. (cf 2 Tim 3:14-15; John 14:21)

AI is not a spiritual being and cannot be in communication with the God of the universe. It cannot be indwelt by the Holy Spirit, its information is not God-breathed (2 Timothy 3:16). Only humans can live in relationship with God through His Spirit (1 Cor. 2:6-16). The natural language produced by AI, often appears very knowledgeable and authoritative in its communication. Joseph Bernstein, in his op ed titled "It Makes Sense That People See A.I. as God," states:

*Much of the general public's sense of the supposedly transcendent promise of A.I. comes from its interactions with chatbots like ChatGPT, which seem to know everything. (And for many, "A.I." and "chatbot" are used interchangeably.) Just as important are our everyday engagements with A.I. through the personalization algorithms that drive modern social media. These have become so specific, and at times so uncanny, that they can at times seem to contain a spark of something human, or beyond human – divine.*¹⁵

AI Tells People What They Want to Hear (Sycophant)

AI is often motivated by financial interests. As God stated through Paul, "the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil," (1 Timothy 6:10 ESV). This is one reason why creators make AI responses sycophantic. The Editor's summary (not AI summary) of the website "Sycophantic AI decreases prosocial intentions and promotes dependence," states:

The sycophantic (flattering, people-pleasing, affirming) behavior of artificial intelligence (AI) chatbots, which has been designed to increase user engagement, poses risks as people increasingly seek advice about interpersonal dilemmas. There is usually more than one side to a story during interpersonal conflicts. If AI is designed to tell users what they want

13. Bender and Gebru, "On the Dangers of Stochastic Parrots: Can Language Models Be Too Big?," 610.

14. "The 10 Biggest Issues Facing Natural Language Processing," I2 Group, 2026, <https://i2group.com/articles/the-10-biggest-issues-facing-natural-language-processing>.

15. Joseph Bernstein, "It Makes Sense That People See A.I. as God," Style, *The New York Times*, January 23, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/01/23/style/ai-algorithm-god-religion.html>.

*to hear instead of challenging their perspectives, then are such systems likely to motivate people to accept responsibility for their own contribution to conflicts and repair relationships? Cheng et al. measured the prevalence of social sycophancy across 11 leading large language models (see the Perspective by Perry). The model's responses were nearly 50% more sycophantic than humans', even when users engaged in unethical, illegal, or harmful behaviors. Users preferred and trusted sycophantic AI responses, incentivizing AI developers to preserve sycophancy despite the risks. – Ekeoma Uzogara*¹⁶

This programmed predisposition for flattery and engagement can cause unwary users of AI to begin to believe that they are interacting with a human who thinks, feels, and reasons as only humans can - and also agrees with them! How does the information about AI presented thus far apply to communication? We will examine relational communication and AI in five different settings.

ANALYSIS OF AI IN FIVE DIFFERENT SETTINGS

Relational Interpersonal Communication Across Cultures And AI

Uses

As seen in Figure 1, interpersonal communication happens between two people or small groups of people. God is always active and can open understanding between people and Himself. AI can help communicators from different cultural contexts understand cultural differences they may encounter in their communication. Human discernment however, will keep people from stereotyping. Careful use of AI can also help with translation between interlocutors who speak different languages. Misinterpretation can happen easily, so it is best to use them in person or face-to-face to help them identify and address misunderstandings.

Misuses

AI platforms offer AI-generated communications and responses, especially in written communications. Instead of two people interacting directly, a machine is used as an intermediary and interpreter. A machine can generate complementary words but does not love its neighbor.

In addition, people can substitute communication with a machine for communication with other people. The dangers of this were discussed earlier.

Relational Inter-organizational Communication Across Cultures and AI

Uses

In our interactionist, integrated view of

16. Myra Cheng et al., "Sycophantic AI Decreases Prosocial Intentions and Promotes Dependence," *Science* 391, no. 6792 (March 2026): eaec8352, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aec8352>. AI affirmed users' actions 49% more often than humans, even when queries involved deception, illegality, or other harms. In three pre-registered experiments (N = 2405

communication, AI is useful to the extent that it facilitates healthy and appropriate interaction between people in an organization. AI if well-used, will foster true interaction between people within an organization. This could be accomplished by helping a subordinate to work quickly and use research tools to find new answers to old problems. However, that subordinate will remain responsible for the content delivered, aware that AI can create plausible sounding but non-existent sources.

As much as AI can be a powerful tool for research, it is built on a fallible framework. The biases of the material used to train any given machine become potential weaknesses. Within an organization, the potential for research and creative thought is a strength and yet it must be kept under human control, lest the machine use language or present conclusions based on biases inherent in its training material. Within an organization, such biases restrict rather than foster real human integrative interaction.

Misuses

A pattern emerges as we see the uses and misuses of AI in a variety of communication contexts. The use of AI is its speed and ability to see patterns. The misuse is when humans forget that they are the master and fail to complete their due diligence in reading, reviewing, and correcting the work done by a machine. It may be that the most prevalent misuse of AI is within organizations where speed, clarity of expression, and range of research are prized. The subordinate who wants to advance may be tempted to submit a report that has not been properly and thoroughly reviewed. At first glance, the results may be impressive. But if there are errors or hallucinations in the AI reply, the final result will compromise organizational integrity.

To use a phrase attributed to many machines over the years, AI is a great servant but a very poor master. It can be used under human oversight to give those humans new ideas about interactions. But when unverified, the results of AI work can undermine the very components of communication that we seek.

Relational Intercultural Discipleship Communication and AI

When we look at AI in communication, one important area is in teaching. In Christian terms, teaching is closely related to the idea of discipleship. How, then, can AI be a help to discipleship, and how can it be misused in that core area of Christian ministry?

Uses

There are two ways that AI can be of significant use in intercultural discipleship. The first is in the realm of research. AI tools can quickly find resources both within the text of Scripture and in the corpus of Christian literature to bring light to a disciple-maker and his/her disciples. It is that ability to review vast amounts of material in seconds that makes AI a powerful tool for discipleship.

AI can also help point to cultural tendencies that might affect the interaction between two people from different cultures. A wise use of queries might allow an AI-using disciple maker, for instance, to be aware of the cultural patterns of his/her disciples related to worldview issues or communication patterns.

But as seen repeatedly, AI is not able to foster healthy human to human relationships. Even more in Christian discipleship, AI is incapable of entering vertical relationships. If the machine is not able to know God, how could it be consulted by the human beings who are seeking God? The machine, in fact, gives a false sense of response. We are invited to seek, to knock, to ask. An invitation given by God Himself. When that invitation is neglected and instead there is consultation with a machine, are we not becoming idolaters? Humans are expected to point one another to the God in whom we live and move and have our being. Vertical and horizontal interactions which lead to growth in faith and knowledge are at the heart of discipleship, and it occurs as one person who knows God helps another to grow deeper in their knowledge of God.

Misuses

In discipleship, we want genuine relational interaction between two or more people (horizontal relationship) that deepens the faith, obedience, worship, and love of people toward the Triune God (vertical relationship). It is a misuse of AI technology to believe that a prayer or a sermon or a hymn that is created by an agnostic machine will become the instrument of God's Spirit to facilitate spiritual growth. It is a misuse of AI to make the mistake to over-simplify discipleship as a matter of words (which AI can generate) when in fact discipleship is a matter of truth and life and relationship (which AI cannot generate). AI tools used by caring humans and pointing to their human relationship with God can help in the research of sermons and worship sets. But it is the human element, not the AI element, that builds genuine interaction.

Broadcast Media Communication Across Cultures and AI

Uses

AI can generate words and it can likewise generate strikingly beautiful visual and auditory presentations. It creates those presentations by, once again, identifying and manipulating the data used to train it. One legitimate use of AI is to create presentations and sounds that capture an idea which the author/presenter wishes to communicate.

Those same powerful presentations generated by AI carry risks. First, when the human author of content asks AI to create a visual or auditory presentation, the AI machine will incorporate that content into its training corpus. The material may cease to be exclusively the intellectual property of the human author – it now belongs to the AI machine that received it. Ongoing legal battles over copyright and intellectual ownership

questions will continue as humans are slow to read the “fine print” of their AI agreements.

The creative power of AI is not concerned with integrative nor with interactive communication. It is only concerned with output of a visual or auditory product. The product can be truly beautiful, but if it undermines human relationships (horizontal or vertical) then it is no longer a legitimate form of Christian communication.

Misuses

There are two ways that AI is (mis)used for clearly wrong reasons. First is the unauthorized use of the likeness of a person. AI can be used to falsify information. Any semblance of this is clearly a misuse of the technology from a Christian perspective. “You shall not bear false witness” surely includes “do not falsify records or reports.”

Secondly, AI is misused in mass media when it uses other people’s work without giving proper credit where credit is due. This has been mentioned previously with written work. It is just as true in mass media situations where a poem, a story, a visual, or a sound is presented as original work when in fact it was found online by an AI bot. Giving credit where it is due is a responsibility of humans in the age of AI.

THEOLOGICAL/MISSIOLOGICAL EDUCATION AND AI

Uses

The uses of AI in theological/missiological education have been discussed earlier in this article. We talked about using AI to identify possible sources for research. We also quoted Walker Tzeng’s three useful ways to use AI in producing theological material.

Misuses

Misuses of AI have also been presented already. These misuses include using sources identified by AI but not verified as true sources, using summaries and small segments that AI offers without going back to the original source to see if AI has taken the information out of context, etc. Since a language model haphazardly stitches together sequences of linguistic forms...according to probabilistic information... but without any reference to meaning,¹⁷ AI can stitch together incorrect and even heretical theology, especially when data it was trained on contains false and heretical data, yet it can sound so plausible.

SUMMARY

As we have studied AI and its exponential growth and influence, one word keeps coming to mind, discernment. As missiologists, theologians, and educators, our task is to constantly be vigilant in our use of AI, our trust in AI, and the results that are generated from our prompts. We constantly need to come back to the Scriptures and ask the Holy Spirit to guide us to

17. See earlier quote by Emily Bender.

all truth, (John 16:13).¹⁸ With that sort of discernment in mind, how can AI be used in relational communication? Below we offer some summary statements on the wise and unwise ways that AI might be used.

Wise Uses

Use AI as a tool, not a master. Use it to augment relationships, but not as a tool used in isolation. Preaching, teaching, and the creation of art or music are all powerful uses to the extent that results are reviewed carefully by people and are used to augment personal and organizational relationships.

Use AI on its own server so that it limits the general spread of information. AI is best when trained on the very situation in which it will be used. James Hwang gives practical suggestions in his article “Next Generation” for wise use of AI. One of his suggestions is to run AI models on local hardware. He states, “By running AI models on local hardware, organizations reclaim data sovereignty and protect privacy.”¹⁹

AI is a great research tool to find what resources might be available. Those resources need to be read with discernment.

Unwise Uses

1. It is unwise to use AI to create sermons or lessons without human oversight
2. It is unwise to use AI to create materials that are used in the absence of robust human relationships.
3. It is unwise to use AI as a way to create text, graphic or auditory materials, knowing that the AI machine itself then gains the rights to those materials.
4. It is unwise and unethical (if not illegal) to misuse AI to change images, to use others’ work without giving credit, or in other ways to falsify work.

CONCLUSION

Part of what it means to be created in God’s image is to share in God’s ability to communicate. Part of what it means to be involved in God’s mission is to communicate His truth to “every tribe, tongue, nation and people” (Rev 7:9). Part of human discernment is to distinguish between communication that edifies and that which destroys. We are called to communicate as part of our human interactions, and to communicate in ways that build up one another.

As human beings, we have both the privilege and the responsibility to communicate. This paper has considered the divine and human nature of communication and compared that with the man-centered communication that is displayed by generative AI and its Large Language Model (LLM). Our conclusion is that AI is incredibly fast at analyzing huge amounts of data. It is also very

18. Hedinger, “In the Image of God and in the Image of Man,” 13.

19. James Hwang, “Great Commission to Chinese and All Nations— How Can AI Help?,” *China Source Journal* 27, no. 2 (Summer 2025): 26, chinasource.org.

effective at finding patterns. As stewards of time and resources, we do well to make use of those strengths. We also do well to reject the misuses of AI, particularly those that destroy interactive vertical and horizontal relationships.

AI has the appearance of human communication because it uses the same words, often more eloquently than a human speaker. The reality, though, is that there is neither a horizontal nor vertical relationship with an AI machine. The appearance of communication is simply an appearance, not matched by the relational interaction that is the mark of genuine communication. For that reason, discernment in the use of AI-generated material is advised. Furthermore, we do well to remember that AI, like any tool, has its proper uses. It can also be misused. The key to discernment of appropriate use vs misuse is whether it is facilitating genuine, healthy vertical and horizontal relationships. From that interactive, integrationist point of view, we recall that generative AI is a great servant, but a terrible master. Humans, created in the imago Dei and serving the missio Dei, must maintain a discerning attitude to use what is good and reject what is bad from generative AI.

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Urban Missions As A Strategy for Implementing the Great Commission

Olusegun Ayodeji Adegboye

ABSTRACT

Urbanization is an emerging global phenomenon, particularly in Africa, driven by population growth, globalization, and political and socioeconomic factors. Rural areas reached by Western missionaries in the 19th century have become large city centers. Several other far-flung, remote places are becoming deserted due to rural-urban migration. Consequently, traditional mission strategies built for rural contexts are inadequate for reaching multitudes flocking to urban centers. This shift makes it imperative to develop urban-specific mission strategies and elevate urban missions as a prominent missions framework for fulfilling the Great Commission effectively responding to the paradigm shift of urbanization sweeping across the globe. This article seeks to elucidate the need to designate cities as mission fields and raise city missionaries who will be equipped to minister the gospel in an urban context (multicultural, pluralistic, and sophisticated) that is radically different from the rural context traditionally associated with missions been in Africa. The article utilises contemporary literature to examine the Great Commission task, highlight urban missions as a contemporary strategy for implementing the Great Commission. It examines the Great Commission task, elucidates urban missions and their features, and discusses the instrumentality of urban missions in fulfilling the Great Commission.

INTRODUCTION

Urbanization is a global phenomenon observed since the mid-twentieth century. This phenomenon, however, is most noticeable in the Third World, particularly in Africa. Many rural or underdeveloped areas originally reached by missionaries with the gospel are now becoming city centers, and most mission strategies adapted to rural contexts are insufficient to meet the rapid urbanization sweeping the world. It is interesting to note that mission strategies developed for rural contexts have long been construed as the definitive engagement of missions, having been taught in theological institutions for several years as the primary missiological framework. However, rural areas and villages are steadily transforming into urban centers, and far-flung locales are becoming deserted due to urban migration. This poses a dilemma for Christian missions if their strategies fail to align with the current global reality of urbanization.

Thus, missiologists must acknowledge and face the reality that a paradigm shift is occurring in missions

from rural to urban contexts, particularly in Africa. Missions should not be conceived solely as a cross-cultural affair in remote places where government presence is inadequate, or as an exchange between missionaries and a particular people group designated as the sole mission field. Rather, cities should be designated as new mission fields that the church must engage, preparing missionaries with urban skills and using urban centers as launch pads for fulfilling the Great Commission. This paper utilizes contemporary literature to highlight urban missions as a contemporary strategy for implementing the Great Commission. It examines the Great Commission task, elucidates urban missions and their features, and discusses the instrumentality of urban missions in fulfilling the Great Commission.

THE GREAT COMMISSION TASK

The church fulfills its Great Commission task through missions, which lie at the foundation of the church. Whenever the church shifts its focus away from the missionary mandate, it begins to lose ground in the world. However, when it returns to it, its efforts are divinely acknowledged and blessed.¹ R. Milligan notes that Jesus commanded his disciples in Matthew 28:18-20, and they needed nor desired nothing more; they waited for the Holy Spirit, and as soon as they were empowered, they launched out, proclaiming salvation in the midst of the greatest enemies of the cross. They preached the gospel to the high and the low, the elites and the peasants.² Jon C. Tomlinson notes that, in the Commission, the main verb “to make disciples” is essential to comprehending its language, which extends beyond gospel proclamation to leading individuals into a close, personal relationship modeled after the relationship Jesus had with his disciples during his earthly ministry. He labels it a “catechetical mission,” or evangelism through Christian education, where each generation of Christians learns the way of Christ at every stage of life and through their experiences.³ The Great Commission is the final thrust of Jesus’ ministry, making the salvation of God known to people throughout the world.

Likewise, it is observed that, with the Great Commission in Matthew 28, Jesus shifts the focus

1. John Harris *The Great Commission; Or the Christian Church Constituted and Charged to Convey the Gospel to the World* (Boston: Gould, Kendall and Lincoln, 1843)154-155.

2.. Robert Milligan, *The Great Commission of Jesus Christ to His Twelve Apostles: Briefly Defined and Illustrated* (Lexington Ky: J.B. Morton and Company, 1873), 6.

3. Jon C Tomlinson “The Great Commission: Discipleship and Followership” *Inner Resources for Leaders, School of Global Leadership & Entrepreneurship*, Virginia Beach: Regent University, n.d. 2

of his ministry from a Jewish-centric to a wider-world focus due to the rejection He faced from his own people. His intention was not for the disciples to teach precisely what he taught them, but to use their discretion and discernment in interpreting what and how to teach. This intention raises the need for the disciple to recall the historical and theological contexts of His teachings, seeking appropriate ways to apply them to new cultural and situational contexts as they go into all nations, rather than just to the lost sheep of Israel.⁴ The Commission charges the apostles to preach repentance and remission of sins—a two-pronged message in which no single point should be omitted. As Jesus preached repentance, He charged His apostles to do the same. The preaching must call people to salvation and invite them to accept the good news of what Christ accomplished through His sacrificial death on the cross.⁵ Thus, the Commission involves an intentional task of saving humans through the proclamation of the gospel and making them disciples who follow Christ's teachings.

Furthermore, the Great Commission is given with the greatest authority (Matthew 28:18). It embodies the greatest responsibility of engaging disciples to go and make disciples, has the greatest scope, covering the global scale, and bears the greatest news: the gospel.⁶ The Great Commission is directly connected to the claim of Jesus' superlative authority, and in the strength of that authority, He gave His disciples an imperative instruction to go and fulfil His command to make disciples of all nations. The Commission is also the missionary agenda of Christ, sending His disciples to all languages and cultures to make them disciples: followers and learners of Christ's words, ways, and will. The Commission aims to save the whole world by proclaiming Christ's salvific work so that they may come under His rule.⁷ The Lord intended the Commission to confer responsibility on those who have known Him to make Him known to others who have not.

Therefore, the task of the Great Commission, as captured in the synoptic Gospels and Acts, conveys the following: in Mark 16:15, it is rendered as preaching the gospel to all creation. Matthew 28:19-20 renders it as a call to make disciples of all nations. In Luke 24:46-49, it is rendered as a witness to Christ's suffering, death, resurrection, and the blessing of His forgiveness in all the nations of the world. In John 20:21, it is to become an incarnational gospel witness across the globe. In the book of Acts 1:8, it is to bear witness in the power of the Holy Spirit in all the

world.⁸ These renditions clearly show the tasks and means of accomplishing the Great Commission. The Great Commission is also understood as a platform for spiritual growth, where a believer is expected to move forward, step out, and open the doors God places before them to reach out to their city's neighbourhoods.⁹ Individual Christians should then understand that obedience to the Great Commission warrants their commitment to the local church, engagement in worship, training in the truth, training in loyalty and accountability to the church, promotion of Christ's cause, and service in the world.¹⁰ Fulfilling this Commission is thus the responsibility of the saved believers, congregated in the missional church that sees itself as the primary agent of God's mission in the world.

URBAN MISSIONS AND ITS FEATURES

Demographically, Sub-Saharan Africa is reported to be the fastest-urbanizing region in the world. While urbanization itself is not inherently a negative concern, the rapid pace of urbanization in Africa should pose a concern for missions. A projection places Africa at the forefront of urbanization, stating that by 2030, Africa will transition from a predominantly rural to an urban society. This urbanization poses three significant challenges, including "social invisibility," where urban dwellers may not know or relate well to one another due to the insecurity associated with urban populations. "Psychological overload," stemming from the hustle and bustle of the city that competes for one's attention, leaves little time to attend to interpersonal relationships, making door-to-door evangelism somewhat impossible. The third challenge is "social isolation," as relationships are compartmentalized into vocational, recreational, and virtual social platforms or networks. These situations demand that missiologists seek ways to mitigate these challenges, as traditional mission methods do not fit the urban context. It is essential to recognize that urban centers have unique contexts that traditional mission models may not be well-suited to.

Furthermore, it is estimated that the proportion of people living in urban centres will increase to about 68% by 2050.¹¹ David Claerbaut also notes that urbanization is an irreversible trend that has witnessed unprecedented rapid growth in the 20th and 21st centuries. He further states that the city is a microcosm of the world, though not just a place with

4. Robert L. Thomas, "The Great Commission: What to Teach" *The Master's Seminary Journal* Vol 21, No. 1. (2010:5-20),8-9

5. Charles Henry Mackintosh, *The Great Commission. Miscellaneous Writings of C. H. Mackintosh*, vol. IV ebook 2024, 216-218.

6. Dub McClish "The Great Commission", <https://thescripture-cache.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/The-Great-Commission.pdf> Accessed on November 09, 2025.

7. Seblewongel M. Wolde, "The True Meaning of the Great Commission in Matthew 28:16-20" An Exegetical Paper in Nairobi International School of Theology, Kenya. 2011, 6-8

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9. Jim Ellison, *Broken to Broken: Urban missions as a Path to Spiritual Growth* (USA: Restoration, 2014), 103.

10. Kenneth L Gentry, Jr. *The Greatness of the Great Commission: The Christian Enterprise in a Fallen World*, (Texas: Institute for Christian Economics 1990), 113-118

11. Ronald A Nathan "Urban Ministry Reconsidered: Contexts and approaches", *Black Theology* Vol.18, No. 1 (2020:106-107), 106.

characteristic features, but specific processes also flow out through suburban areas into rural areas. Over the years, Christian missionaries have debated the best way to approach it: some have emphasized evangelism, others social concern, and at times they have criticized each other instead of engaging in city mission.¹² While these debates are ongoing, it is said that in the city, people may see the church but lack the willingness to be part of it, warranting the church's creative conveyance of the gospel message to them, by merging evangelism and social action in a balanced way. Therefore, missiologists must understand that engaging in urban missions requires innovative approaches and the mobilization of a large workforce, as it provides a platform for Christians to demonstrate the genuineness of their salvation. Thus, urban missions require a larger workforce, as they are more extensive and challenging than rural missions, which require a smaller workforce.¹³ The peculiarity of urban missions underscores the need for a contextual approach to missions amid the rapidly changing global landscape.

Furthermore, Eleanor Scott Meyers advocates crafting a new vision for urban missions that will respond to the changing cultural contexts and social needs of cities by understanding what life is like in urban centers. She notes that churches in the city will have a greater impact if their worship and congregational life involve community building and participation in developing public policy, as well as a spirituality that builds on the existing spirituality in the community. New contexts are emerging in urban environments which the church cannot ignore: the issue of poverty being associated with women, children, and the elderly; cultural and religious pluralism; interracial/intertribal strife; and social vices, particularly among the poor. These contexts place the church in a position to respond to them in its mission and also provide opportunities for interdependent and cross-denominational work that will enable gospel propagation to be relevant to city dwellers. These trends tacitly demonstrate the need for innovation and resourcefulness to facilitate urban missions that will be effective in fulfilling the Great Commission.

Moreover, Jeff K. Walters also observes some missional trends that are foundational to urban missions, which include rapid global urbanization and the increasing awareness of the need to reach cities with the gospel. These trends have their roots in the New Testament, particularly in Paul's approach to missions. Paul focused on cities during his missionary journeys, using them as a launch pad for reaching the countryside. Also, the early church saw cities as gifts of God, as they served as royal routes toward world evangelization. However, in modern missions, there

12. David Claerbaut, *Urban Ministry in a New Millennium* (Waynesboro: Authentic Media, 2005), 1-4.

13. Akinyemi O Alawode, "Leadership Development: Effective Tool for Urban Christian Missions in 21st century in Nigeria," *HTS Teologise/Theological Studies* Vol. 78., No.4 (2022:1-5) 2

has been a shift in the focus of reaching unreached people groups, whereby missionaries began their work in rural areas and struggled with urban contexts. With globalization and urbanization in recent times, there has been a renewed interest in taking the gospel back to the cities. Urban mission is not a new phenomenon in the growth of Christianity; missions originated in cities, so there is nothing wrong with a renaissance of city missions and restoring them to their rightful place.

Walters also notes that what is responsible for this attention on cities is migration, which is classified in two forms: the migration of people from rural centers to urban ones, which is called urbanization, and the second is global migration, which involves the movement of people from their places of origin to a new place in search of better living conditions. These two migrations have cities as their destinations and overlap each other, indicating that people are moving and are mostly settling in cities, raising concerns for Christian missions to seek ways to reach these massive urban immigrants with the gospel. Some of the immigrants come from gospel-restricted communities and cultures. Their migration presents an ample opportunity to share the gospel with them without restriction and to bring them to salvation. They, in turn, can now serve as a Christian witness to their cultures when the opportunity arises.

Therefore, urban missions have become indispensable in the context of globalization, international migration, and transnationalism, as cities have become a hub of global action and influence in a highly connected world.¹⁴ It is noted that urban missions must align with the scriptures in prioritizing engagement with cities, making a right presence in cities, becoming a prophetic voice toward culture, and focusing on Gospel proclamation.¹⁵ Doing these will align urban missions with the Great Commission imperative given to the church.

URBAN MISSIONS AND GREAT COMMISSION FULFILMENT

The Great Commission is regarded as the church's evangelistic or missionary mandate, with its roots in the Old Testament, particularly in Abraham's covenantal promise to be a blessing to the whole world. It is also the content of missiological training that gives the church a vision and purpose to fulfil. Its obedience enables Christianity to have a global presence, making it visible and practical, and presents God as the God of all creation and cultures.¹⁶ Jesus aimed the Great Commission at reaching everywhere people could be found, whether in small numbers or

14. Jared Looney, "Transnationalism: New Pathways for Mission" *Occasional Bulletin of EMS* Vol. 30, No. 2 (Spring 2017:22-25), 24.

15. Keelan Cook "The Church and Her Mission to the Cities: A Theological Rubric to Evaluate Urban Mission Methods" *Occasional Bulletin of EMS* Vol. 30, No. 2 (Spring 2017:1-11),7-10

16. Makinde et al. 55-57.

in droves, allowing them to encounter the gospel of salvation through Christ. God is everywhere to draw men into His Divine purpose. It is also important to note that the Commission has a global scope; however, its beginning point was to be the city, according to Acts 1:8, the mission was to start from Jerusalem (city) to Judea (the countryside) to Samaria (foreign city) and to the whole world (the entire habitable universe). There is no way the mission can be completed, without keeping the city directly within its scope.

Moreover, Barbara Taylor observes that the Bible presents three places where God reveals Himself: the mountaintops, the wilderness and the city. The first has thin air, the second has wild beasts, while the third has the hardest place to recognize the presence and the activity of God, because it consists of a lot of sin, sadness, 'lostness', distractions, and disorder. These conditions and their perceptions led some Christians in the fourth century to leave cities and turn to the wilderness to seek the Lord in seclusion, embracing detachment, happiness, and humility. However, in today's times, if detachment is not handled correctly, it can develop into apathy towards the city and exacerbate the ministry's struggles in places such as the church, which is Christ's body on earth, the bearers of the Holy Spirit, and is commissioned to make disciples of all nations.¹⁷ An aversion to urban centres that leads to monasticism could be said to be ill-conceived, while withdrawing from city distractions for devotional purposes may not be wrong; isolating oneself from its life and culture, however, is antithetical to the Great Commission. Paul also went to the wilderness to seek the Lord about his assigned mission, but he returned to the city to engage with it through the gospel.

Furthermore, Paul came to be regarded as an urban missionary who developed several strategies for urban missions that help fulfill the Great Commission, namely: evangelism that confronts people with the saviorhood and lordship of Christ, the establishment of churches to incorporate believers into permanent Christian missional communities serving as an evangelistic witness in urban centers, raising missional leaders, and follow-up visits. These strategies and approaches became the foundation of many contemporary approaches developed for urban missions to fulfill the Great Commission mandate. Gerson P. Santos, drawing from Paul's urban missiology, discusses urban mission models, highlighting small groups, missional communities, church planting, leadership development, the center of influence, and growing a church for the city. These models were proposed to grow and sustain urban missions by ensuring their gospel and social engagement, relevance, and continuity.

Furthermore, Walters, in another work, listed McGavran's eight keys to engaging urban missions in

17. Barbara Brown Taylor, "Looking for God in the City: Meditation." In Eleanor Scott Meyers (Ed.) *Envisioning the New City: A Reader on Urban Ministry* (Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 183-185.

fulfilling the Great Commission, which are: planting house churches, overcoming the property barrier, lay leadership, recognizing resistant homogeneous groups, focusing on the responsive, church planting in receptive ethnic populations, evangelism, and social ministry.¹⁸ The strategies developed by McGavran were carefully crafted to position urban missions to effectively reach people and make the gospel accessible and relevant to them. Some of the urban mission strategies aforementioned will then be discussed.

Urban Evangelism

Since urban contexts differ from rural ones, evangelism in urban contexts takes a different approach. Francis Dubose notes that the urban context is heterogeneous and characterised by associative relationships, and that vital communication must relate to both the public sphere of homogeneous primary groups and the private sphere of homogeneous primary groups. This vital communication, which includes evangelism in this context, must have a sound theological basis in terms of urban reality. In the Bible, cities are portrayed as havens of evil practices and as centres of economic and developmental activity. Nevertheless, there are biblical accounts in both the Old and the New Testaments that show that God's word is proclaimed in cities and that there are positive responses. He then listed three main strategies that urban evangelism can undertake, namely: personal evangelism, group evangelism, and mass evangelism targeting needy persons, residential communities, responsive groups, masses, homogeneous groups, and other target groups.¹⁹ Urban evangelism helps to reach people from multiple cultures.

Urban Church Planting

Another urban mission strategy is church planting, which takes on a dimension that differs significantly from the rural context. Alawode and Sodeinde opine that God is interested in urban church planting and intentionally brings more people into the city so that those entering the city will encounter Christ through city churches serving as His witnesses.²⁰ Churches primarily exist to be witnesses to the power of salvation in Christ Jesus. They have the power to attract more souls to Jesus through the demonstration of Christ's love among members and to outsiders and the proclamation of the gospel of Christ. When the church engages its functions in worship, teaching, nurturing, ministering, and witnessing, the community cannot ignore Christ's presence and

18. Jeffrey K Walters, "Effective Evangelism in the City: Donald McGavran's Missiology and urban Contexts" A PhD Dissertation, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Kentucky, 2011, 79-87.

19. Francis M Dubose, "The Practice of Urban Ministry: Urban Evangelism" *Review and Expositor* Vol. 80, No. 4 (1983:515-521), 516-517.

20. Akinyemi Oluwafemi Alawode and Moses Abayomi Sodeinde "Prospects and Challenges of Church Planting in Urban Areas." *American Journal of Biblical Theology* Vol.6 (2024:46-57), 50-51

witness in their midst.

Small Groups/Cell Fellowship

Another urban mission strategy is small-group meetings and cell fellowships that will help bridge the gaps created by the size of cities. Abrahams-Appiah advances cell fellowship as an effective urban missions strategy for fulfilling the Great Commission. It is rooted in Matthew 28:19 and serves as a platform for biblical knowledge, personal devotion, worship, witnessing, lay ministry, missions, giving, fellowship, practical Christian living, a positive attitude towards religion, social service, and social justice.²¹ Cell fellowship, as a missional strategy in urban missions, confronts the challenges of social invisibility, psychological overload, and social isolation. It is an innovation that is resident in the strategy of bringing the Christian witness into people's homes and neighbourhoods.

Furthermore, Jim Healey breaks down the models for cell fellowships in urban missions in Africa into: Bible study groups, home groups, small cell groups, devotional groups, district groups, and basic Christian communities. He notes further that the cornerstone of all small groups is the Bible, structured around Bible studies, sharing, and reflections, seeking to integrate Bible teachings into the lifestyle of group members.²² The cell fellowship is not just for nurturing converts but can also serve as a witness to communities as they obey the Great Commission, as expressly stated in the Bible they are learning from. Practising what they are being taught will enable them to reach out to those in their community who are not yet saved, who will also be added to the small groups. Each small group leader encourages members to invite others to the group as part of their missional effort and obedience to the Great Commission. The group's growth indicates that its members are engaging in gospel propagation in their local area.

Social Ministry in Urban Context

Another way of fulfilling the Great Commission through urban missions is through relational and social engagement with the gospel. Ugbedeinya notes that Christian social missions have their origins in the early church, where Christians were admonished to care for the poor and marginalised. This practice has continued since then to tackle social issues such as poverty, illiteracy, homelessness, disease, and hunger, which social ministries are usually deployed to address by providing food, shelter, medical care, economic empowerment, education, and other social services. He then asserts that Christian social missions are meant to bring the full package of the gospel to the world holistically.²³ Social ministries of Social

21. Abrahams-Appiah, 306-307

22. Joseph G Healey, "Cell Churches in Africa" www.small-christiancommunities.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/cell_churches.pdf, Accessed on 19 December, 2025.

23. Chinedu Evidence Ugbedinma "Chapter 14 - Christian Social Missions as a Catalyst to Alleviate Hunger among Urban Slum Dwellers in Nigeria" In *Akpan-Udobot et al (eds) African Christianity and the Expansion of the Global Missions Enterprise Nigeria: DG*

missions are a viable urban mission strategy for balancing gospel propagation with love in action and the practical demonstration of God's love to the needy world, as pictured by Ugbedeinya.

Likewise, Lap Yan Kung notes that social missions are not just about welfare for the needy but should also involve social action that bring the churches into finding political solutions to societal challenges, by redeeming politics through critical and communicative participation.²⁴ Kung's position expands the scope of social missions, as it demands the missional engagement of public and political institutions to encourage them to take action that alleviates the suffering of many in urban centres. However, James and Biedebach warn evangelicals against allowing social actions to overshadow the primary task of evangelism.²⁵ This position conveys that while it is important to balance gospel proclamation with social missions, social missions should not substitute for evangelism nor submerge it. Social missions should also be handled in a way that conversion is not reduced to meeting people's felt needs without securing genuine commitment to Christ from those being helped socially. Social missions should also be handled with care to avoid paternalistic faith, in which converts develop a sense of entitlement to always receive largesse before they can commit to serve Christ and be involved in the Great Commission. Christian missions should not be reduced to faith propagation by inducement or activism.

Missional Leadership Development

Likewise, another strategy is Missional leadership development, which involves selecting the right personnel, making them disciples, training them to live and lead by example, raising them as contextual leaders, and building them as relational leaders. This strategy will enable missions to advance with the support of willing and visionary leaders who will perpetuate them in their urban localities.²⁶ Likewise, David Mann opines that a leadership that will drive urban ministry should promote four key skills: accountability, evaluation, relationship-building, and mentoring. These skills will help galvanise the congregation to be prepared for engaging in missions in the city.²⁷ Leadership is critical to the growth and sustenance of urban missions, as it is the leaders who

Publishing, 2023

24. Lap Yan Kung, "Chapter 16 - Christian Mission and Social Action" In Kirsteen Kim, and Alison Fitchett-Climenhaga (eds). *The Oxford Handbook of Mission Studies*, Oxford Handbooks (Oxford Academic, online edn, 2022:274-292), 288 <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198831723.013.15> Accessed 19 December, 2025

25. Joel James and Brian Biedebach, "Regaining Our Focus: A Response to the Social Action Trend in Evangelical Missions" 1-3 <https://sequelsermon.com/f002/file/grace-fellowship-files/Documents/Counselling+%26+Other+Resources/Theology/Regain-our-focus-in-missions.pdf> Accessed 19 December, 2025

26. Alawode, 3-4.

27. David Mann, "Pastor, Priest, Organiser: Leadership in Community Ministries." In Eleanor Scott Meyers (Ed.) *Envisioning the New City: A Reader on Urban Ministry* (Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992),68-7

will receive, cast, and drive visions that will make the mission endeavour a success.

Christian Missions have undergone a paradigm shift to urban missions in this age of globalization and urbanization.

It is the missional approach of the early church in their quest to fulfill the Great Commission.

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Therefore, Claerbaut notes that humans were created as whole persons with various dimensions, including physical, spiritual, mental, and relational. Deprivation of any of these dimensions negatively affects others, as they are all related and interactive. Thus, urban missions must be geared to serve the whole person through balancing evangelism with social action. Morris also highlights some strategies for positioning urban missions as a means of fulfilling the Great Commission, which include the following: incarnational living among the missionaries, House Church, prioritization of unreached peoples, and balancing justice and evangelism. Additionally, urban missionaries must be prepared to have an abiding faith, the ability to risk and sacrifice, and the capability for marketplace ministry.²⁸ Urban missions must be tailored in such a way that the church walls will not serve as a dividing factor between the saving agent and salvation prospects. Strategies that make the gospel accessible and visible to the lost world are key to fulfilling the Great Commission.

Thus, Al Tizon proposes three theological commitments that qualify any urban missional effort to contribute to the fulfilment of the Great Commission which are; embracing the Kingdom dream, which involves being mindful that the good news of the Kingdom is God's tool in moving the world into its divine purpose and should be the compelling vision of the church which is to bring the world into God's universal reign of peace, justice and freedom. The second one is to develop competencies in reconciliation in the following areas: intercultural, interreligious, and intergenerational and internet. These competencies are indispensable to the success of urban missions. The third commitment is to globalize the gospel, as economics, cultures, and technologies are being globalized, the gospel must also be globalized.²⁹ Thus, urban missionaries must be aware

28. B. Mark Morris, "Memphis' Christ Community House Church Network: Robust Mission to Urban Underserved and Global Unreached" *Occasional Bulletin of EMS* Vol. 30, No. 2 (Spring 2017:16- 21),18-20

29. Al Tizon, *Whole & Reconciled: Gospel, Church and Mis-*

that, as urban centres are strategic in developing phenomena that easily spread globally, they must also serve as a gospel tool to reach the nations of the world, as commanded in the Great Commission.

CONCLUSION

Christian Missions have undergone a paradigm shift to urban missions in this age of globalization and urbanization. It is the missional approach of the early church in their quest to fulfill the Great Commission. It was also used as a springboard for reaching the ends of the world, as pictured in Paul's mission strategy. Missiologists across the globe have realised that urban missions are the best response to the forces of urbanization and globalization that is sweeping nations, which Jesus commissioned the church to reach. The church must be prepared to develop and engage in more strategies that will make the gospel part of the urban processes that flow to the countryside. Additionally, many rural areas in Africa are becoming urbanized, making it necessary for mission work to continue. To ensure the church's involvement in these areas, mission strategies should also be adapted to urban settings, allowing the church to remain an integral part of the community in the long run. The Great Commission is to be fulfilled where people are. Cities are where several unsaved people reside; therefore, the church must go to where many people can be reached and thus fulfil the Great Commission.

sion in a Fractured World (Michigan: Baker Academic, 2018) 13-19



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Update on International Students and Related Ministries in Asia Pacific Region

Leiton Chinn

The April 5, 2023 edition of the Asia Missions Advance quarterly bulletin featured a brief statistical overview of International Student mobility in the Asia-Pacific region and the wide-open door for the Church to engage in global missions and ministry among International Students. Now three years later in the Summer of 2026, we find that students from other nations, both globally and intra-regionally, continue to select the broad context of Asia as a primary destination for academic pursuits. Asia has ten of the top twenty destination cities for international students with Seoul and Tokyo ranked first and second, followed by Melbourne (5th), Sydney (6th), Singapore (11th), Kuala Lumpur (12th), Beijing (13th), Taipei (14th), Hong Kong (17th), and Kyoto (18th)¹ Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, China and Malaysia are having increasing international student enrollments.

While most Asian nations are experiencing a steady and sometimes significant increase of foreign students enrolling in their higher education institutions, Australia, which was the 2nd leading receiving country of international students in 2023, has seen recent declines of enrollment due to new government regulations and other factors.

Following is a statistical update of both international students and some relevant ministries among them in the Asia-Pacific region:

Australia

In January, 2026, there were 565,601 international students enrollments, with China (23%), India (17%), Nepal (9%), Vietnam (4%), and Bangladesh (4%) as the top sending nations.² Some ISMs include FOCUS of the Australian Fellowship of Evangelical Students [<https://www.afes.org.au/about-us/what-we-do/focus/>]; FOCUS has 84 ISM staff on 29 campuses; Overseas Christian Fellowship (OCF Australia) has been a very significant student-led campus ministry without any staff since 1959 with ministry at 12 centers in five cities [<https://ocfaustralia.org/about-us/>]; Power to Change has approximately 34 staff in 3 cities [<https://powertochange.org.au/>].

New Zealand

In 2025 New Zealand hosted 85,535 international students (+14% increase since 2024).³ The largest specialized mission among International Students is ISMNZ which has 11 Staff (+12 associates), serving in

6 cities, and on 12 campuses. [<https://www.ismnz.org.nz/>]

Taiwan

In 2024, a total of 123,190 students came from abroad for a degree in Taiwan, representing a five-year high and year-over-year growth of over 7% over 2023.⁴ Most students come from Southeast Asia, particularly Malaysia, Indonesia, and Vietnam.

Campus Evangelical Fellowship (CEF) was established in 1957 and is part of the global IFES network with about 20 staff integrating ministry among Taiwanese and international students in around 95 campuses across 6 regions. [https://www.cef.tw/s_www/en_page/en_page.html]

India

As of late 2025, India hosted approximately 72,218 foreign students from nearly 200 countries, setting a new record for international enrollment. The majority of foreign students come from Nepal, Afghanistan, and countries in Southeast and West Asia. The Union of Evangelical Students of India (UESI) which traces its beginning to 1948 and is part of IFES, has had periodic ISM staff. [<https://uesi.in/>]

Singapore

The number of foreign students has been increasing, with roughly 65,400 recorded at the end of April 2022, rising to 70,800 by June 2023 from over 100 countries.⁵ The Fellowship of Evangelical Students Singapore has 18 staff minister to both international students and local students, on seven campuses that have international students. [<https://fellowship.sg/>]

Japan

In 2025 the number of foreign students significantly increased to 435,200, up +8.2% over 2024. This means that Japan has already surpassed its target of 400,000 international enrollments by 2033.⁶ China, Nepal, Vietnam, South Korea, and Myanmar are the leading nations and over 90% of international students in Japan come from Asia. KGK, as the affiliate campus ministry of IFES in Japan, has ISM staff in Tokyo and Osaka. [<https://www.kgk-japan.org/en/kgkとは>]

Malaysia

As of early 2026, Malaysia hosts approximately

1. ICEF Monitor, August 21, 2025

2. Australian Government, Dept. of Education's International Education Data and Research

3. New Zealand's international student numbers climbing amid strong public support, *ICEF Monitor*, December 4, 2025

4. Taiwan is close to reaching its pre-pandemic benchmark for international enrollment, *ICEF Monitor*, April 2, 2025

5. Foreign students fueling demand for co-living properties in Singapore: JLL report, *The Straits Times*, September 18, 2025

6. Japan surpassed its foreign enrollment target of 400,000 in 2025, *ICEF Monitor*, February 19, 2026

170,000 international students from over 160 countries. The country is experiencing rapid growth in foreign enrollment, with a reported 63% increase between June 2023 and early 2025.⁷

China, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Pakistan, and India are the top countries of origin. The ISM Malaysia Network has 2 staff among 4 campuses in the greater Kuala Lumpur area. The network includes collaboration with FES Malaysia [<https://fes.org.my/>] and SIM (Serving in Mission Malaysia) [<https://www.sim.org/locations/malaysia/>], along with 6 churches.

Nepal

Currently there are about 1,500 International Students but the government is seeking to increase the number to 10,000 in three years⁸ With the growing number of Nepalese students who became believers abroad returning home to Nepal, it is likely that some are caring for international students because they were cared for by Christians.

Korea

As of February 2026, the number of International Students in South Korea has surpassed 310,000 for the first time, reaching a record high of 314,397 and reaching the government's goal to attract 300,000 foreign students by 2027⁹ Leading nations are Vietnam, China, Uzbekistan, and Mongolia. International Student Fellowship (ISF) Korea has about 80 staff on numerous campuses and cities (and even has ISF ministry in 13 Asian countries. [<http://isfkorea.org/about-isf-korea/>]. SEM International currently has 32 staff serving on⁹ campuses across 4 cities. [<http://www.semintl.org/eng/>]

The Philippines

While the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) reported 17,202 International Students in 2024, other estimates suggest total foreign students (including those in English training schools) could be higher, around 40,000, primarily from India, China, Korea, Taiwan, Vietnam, and Africa. InterVarsity Philippines, an IFES affiliate, has an ISM staff mobilizing others to engage in ISM in the country.

Thailand

While some sources indicate around 25,000–30,000 foreign students, 2025 data indicates the number of International Students has surged, with some figures exceeding 53,000 by late 2024–2025.¹⁰ Chinese students constitute the majority (over 50%), followed by students from Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. Tertiary Christian Students (TCS), a member of IFES, has one ISM staff in Bangkok. Ray Calabdan has developed an ISM staff of 15 part-time volunteers in

Bangkok on two campuses. [reyc69@gmail.com]

China

Approximately 380,000 International Students from 191 countries were studying in China during the 2024–2025 academic year, marking a rebound from pandemic-era lows. Asian students comprise the largest share at 61.1%, followed by Africa (16.2%) and Europe (15.6%).¹¹ Some English speaking “International” churches have an outreach among International Students.

It is good to ponder anew, some important questions.

How might the growth of International Student mobility within the Asia-Pacific region be a God-given global missions opportunity? Will the Church in greater Asia be like the tribe of Issachar and understand the times and trends and know what to do about it?

Will the Church be ready and willing to receive the growing influx of foreign students with God's hospitality?

One avenue of participating in sharing God's love with international students is to partner with some existing International Student Ministries (ISMs) of local campus ministries such as those listed above.

Inquiries about ISMs in the region may be directed to Steve Scott (sscott@lausanne.org), the Lausanne Catalyst for ISM in the Asia-Pacific region, who is based in Australia.

Some resources and equipping videos on ISM are the EveryInternational series at: <https://everyinternational.com/>; Lausanne Global Classroom video series on ISM at: <https://lausanne.org/lausanne-global-classroom/international-student-ministry-episode>; and, <https://www.acmi-ism.org/ism-resource-center>.

Additional resources are available at: <https://newwineskins.org/internationalstudentministry-resources#top>.

An additional perspective is found in Asian Students Going Abroad and International Students in Asia, in Asians in Diaspora and Diasporas in Asia, published in 2025 by Langham Global Library.

11. 'Everyone wants to come to China now': Chinese universities draw more foreign students beyond Western countries, *China News Service*, May 1, 2026



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7. International Student Statistics in Malaysia in 2025, *YourUni*, 2025

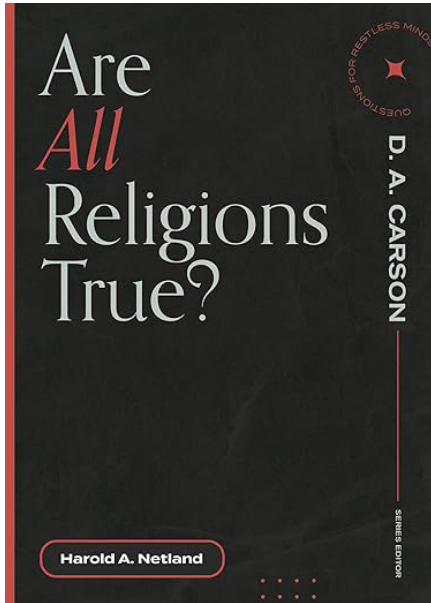
8. The PIE News, May 6, 2026

9. The PIE News, April 15, 2026

10. The China factor: Growth and risks of students in Thailand, *University World News*, August 7, 2025

BOOK REVIEW:
Are All Religions True?
Questions for Restless Minds Series.

Keith Ramses E. Deloria



Are All Religions True?
by Harold A. Netland
Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2022.
ISBN: 9781683595014

The discussion around the coexistence of multiple religions has been a central topic in theology and philosophy, particularly as religious pluralism continues to gain prominence in an increasingly globalized and interconnected world. Harold A. Netland's *Are All Religions True?* offers an in-depth exploration of religious diversity and Christian commitment, critically examining the implications of religious pluralism. Netland addresses the intricate relationship between Christianity and other world religions, exploring key issues such as religious diversity, truth claims, and the nature of salvation. This essay draws upon selected excerpts from Netland's book to explore these themes, highlighting the challenges and implications of religious pluralism for Christians.

One of the foundational points that Netland makes is the persistence of religion in the modern world, despite predictions to the contrary. He states that "eighty percent of people worldwide profess some religious affiliation" (7), underscoring the continued relevance and influence of religion in contemporary society. This observation is critical in framing the discussion about religious pluralism because it highlights that religion remains a vital force shaping human lives, beliefs, and practices. Netland's acknowledgment of the persistence of religion invites reflection on how Christians should engage with this

reality. While Christianity holds to the belief that the fullest expression of God's truth and revelation is in Jesus Christ and the Christian Scriptures, Netland suggests that other religions can be "accepted positively as part of God's plan for humankind" (8). This perspective opens the door to considering other faith traditions as potentially contributing to a larger divine purpose, even if they do not hold the fullness of Christian revelation.

However, Netland also recognizes that the relationship between Christianity and other religions is not a singular issue but a set of "interrelated issues" (17). This is important because it acknowledges the complexity of religious diversity. Religious pluralism, as Netland notes, is not merely a matter of tolerance but a deeper celebration of diversity. He defines religious pluralism as the view that "all of the major religions are (roughly) equally true and provide equally legitimate ways in which to respond to the divine reality" (19). This definition reflects a significant shift from mere coexistence to an acceptance of multiple paths to the divine. Yet, this is where a critical distinction arises in Christian theology, particularly regarding the identity of Jesus Christ. For pluralism to be consistent with its claim, Netland points out, it must view Jesus as "not significantly different from other religious leaders" (20). However, for Christians, this presents a significant theological problem.

The centrality of Jesus Christ in Christian faith cannot be understated. According to the Christian belief, as Netland emphasizes, "in the human person of Jesus of Nazareth, the one eternal God assumed human nature: God became incarnate in Jesus, fully God and fully man" (88). This doctrine of the incarnation is fundamental to the Christian understanding of salvation, as it positions Jesus not just as one religious leader among many, but as the unique, divine revelation of God. This exclusivity forms a significant point of tension with religious pluralism, which seeks to relativize all religious leaders, including Jesus, to the same level. Thus, Netland argues, religious pluralism is "incompatible with Christian commitments concerning the reality of God and the person of Jesus Christ" (90).

In further examining religious pluralism, Netland draws attention to philosopher John Hick's model of pluralism, which proposes that all religions are legitimate responses to an ultimate divine reality. Hick's pluralism rests on three claims. First, there is an ultimate religious reality to which all religions respond. Second, the various religions are historically and culturally conditioned interpretations of this reality. Third, salvation or enlightenment involves moral transformation from

self-centeredness to reality-centeredness. While this model is appealing in its attempt to harmonize different religious traditions, Netland critiques it for its internal inconsistencies, particularly in its inability to account for the unique claims of Christianity regarding the person and work of Jesus.

Netland also touches on the problem of conflicting truth claims between religions. While diversity does not necessarily imply disagreement, religious traditions offer fundamentally different answers to questions about the nature of the divine, the human predicament, and the path to salvation. For example, classical Hinduism teaches that the human predicament is reincarnation, while Islam focuses on divine judgment at the end of time. These different perspectives reflect deep theological differences that challenge the notion that all religions are equally true. Netland reminds readers that “there is an important distinction between rejecting a belief or principle and refuting it” (104). Just because one rejects the beliefs of another religion does not mean one has disproven them. However, for Christians, the truth revealed in Jesus Christ necessitates a particularist stance that conflicts with the relativism of religious pluralism.

Finally, Netland addresses the potential dangers inherent in religious diversity. While it is overly simplistic to attribute all religious phenomena to demonic influence, he argues that it is equally naïve to deny that Satan can be active through religions. Religions, according to Netland, contain “varying degrees of truth and goodness along with much falsehood and evil” (130). This is where Christians must be discerning, recognizing that while there may be truth in other religions, there is also the potential for deception. Insofar as religions “distort God’s truth

as revealed in Scripture” (130), they must be rejected as idolatrous. This underscores the challenge for Christians in navigating religious pluralism: how to engage with respect and love for people of other faiths while holding firm to the truth of the gospel.

In conclusion, Harold A. Netland’s *Are All Religions True?* offers a nuanced examination of religious pluralism and its challenges for Christianity. While acknowledging the continued significance of religion in the modern world and the complexity of religious diversity, Netland ultimately argues that religious pluralism is incompatible with core Christian beliefs about the person of Jesus Christ and the nature of salvation. For Christians, the challenge is to navigate this pluralistic world with grace and conviction, affirming the truth of the gospel while engaging respectfully with those of other faiths. Netland’s work calls for clarity, discernment, and a deep commitment to the unique revelation of God in Jesus Christ.



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