

***Navigating the Changing Landscape of
World Christianity***

Wesley Granberg-Michaelson

Festival of Theology Lecture
Louisville Presbyterian Seminary

April 13, 2015

Christian witness, ministry, mission and evangelism today take place within the radically changing landscapes of world Christianity. And these changing landscapes, in my view, should change the paradigms, theological perspectives, partners, and the sharing of power as we all seek today to join in God's ongoing mission in the world. That includes congregations and ministries like your own.

The framework I will share in this lecture identifies six specific ways in which the landscape of world Christianity is changing, and then suggests possible responses. My hope and prayer is that this will be helpful as we reflect on how these challenges are not just global ones, but also impact how we approach congregational ministry in North America. These changes in our global landscape are **geographical, spiritual, theological, economic, migratory, and ecumenical.**

The Geographical Landscape

When we talk about the changing landscape of world Christianity, what most immediately comes to mind is the dramatic geographical relocation of where the majority of Christians are now found around the globe. The breadth and speed of these changes are without historic precedent. All this has

been well studied and documented. Let's review this to make sure we are all on the same geographical page with a few facts which bring these changes into focus:

- For one thousand years Christianity's center of gravity—meaning the point at which an equal number of Christians around the globe were found to the north south, east, and west--remained in Europe. Then, from 1910 to 2010, it moved from Spain to a point near Timbuktu, Africa—the most rapid geographical shift in all of Christian history.
- By 1980, more Christians were living in the global South than the global North for this first time in 1000 years.
- In 1910, 2% of Africa's population was Christian. Today, one out of four Christians in the world is an African.
- The continents of Latin America and Africa now hold 1 billion of the world's Christian community, with trends that continue to grow.
- By the year 2025, Asia's present 350 million Christians are projected to grow to 460 million.
- In the last decade, Islam grew in Asia by 1.7%, while Christianity grew by 2.4%.

- In 1910, 80% of the world's Christians were found in Europe and North America. A century later, that had dropped to 40%.
- For evangelicals the shift is even more dramatic: 90% were found in U.S. and Europe a century ago, while today 75% of evangelicals are in the global South.
- On any given Sunday, it is estimated that more people attend worship in congregations in China than in the United States.

These trends are relatively clear. As Christianity continues to grow in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, by the end of this century, in 2100, Christians living in the global South and East will number 2.8 billion, and be about three times more than the 775 million Christians projected to be found in the global North.

In many ways, we're witnessing a return of Christianity to the non-Western cultures of Asia and Africa, reflecting more the environments which first gave rise to the church. But now Christianity is embedded in hundreds of cultures and languages demonstrating an incredible diversity of peoples and places that have received its incarnational presence.

Implications

We can no longer think of Christianity as having a particular geographical and cultural "center," which for centuries had been

seen as being rooted in the “West.” Of course, for parts of the Christian tradition, such as the Orthodox, this was never true. But now, universally, this is no longer true.

This includes, I would argue, the Catholic Church, accounting for about one-half of all Christians. While Rome may remain its administrative and affectional center, the spiritual vitality and prophetic resonance so admired in Pope Francis has resulted because, for the first time in more than 1200 years, he is a Pope from the global South. He echoes the voice of two-thirds of all Catholics who today are found in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

When academics use the term “world Christianity,” they refer to the new reality of its multi-faceted, highly diverse presence throughout the globe. This means, as never before, that mission today is polycentric and multi-directional. It flows from a multitude of places to a myriad of destinations, and returns.

Further, if there is no center, then how can we speak of “margins?” Perhaps one of the implications of the dramatic geographical shift in world Christianity’s landscape is that the Spirit is radically transforming these assumptions. If mission now arises from any number of unexpected places and moves toward unanticipated destinations, then even reversing the definitions of

who is at the center, and who is at the margin, doesn't fully capture the new realities that we are encountering.

But this much is clear. The animating forces, ministries, and movements which will shape the future of world Christianity are emerging largely from the global South. Christians in Africa, Latin America, and Asia will now be the primary authors of its vision and direction of its mission.

My own worry is that the established churches in the United States may be the last to understand and internalize this new reality. Following the mindset of our nation, with its unmatched global economic and military power, our default assumption is that Christian witness and mission finds its center with us, and flows out to the world. But all that has changed. If we don't recognize this, we will be blinded to the movement of God's Spirit in the world today.

The Spiritual Landscape

Changes in the landscape of world Christianity have to do with far more than just geography. Christianity has now emerged as a non-Western religion. As its dominant expressions are growing today outside the familiar home of Western culture, we

are witnessing the spiritual resurgence of non-Western Christianity.

With this come expressions of Christian worship and practice that are focused more on experience, and on all the senses, rather than those forms that are more rationalistic. This cuts across denominational traditions.

The most dramatic evidence of this movement is the rapid, even astonishing rise of Pentecostalism. Modern Pentecostal history is usually dated to the Azusa Street revival in Los Angeles a little more than a century ago. The explosive growth of Pentecostalism around the world in the last century, along with the religious transformation of the African continent, are the two most compelling narratives of Christian history in the twentieth century, and each continues today.

In 1970, about 5% of Christians identified themselves as Pentecostal. But today, one out of every four Christians in the world is Pentecostal or charismatic. (“Charismatic” simply refers those who exhibit Pentecostal gifts and practices, but belong to non-Pentecostal denominations.) 80% of Christian conversions in Asia are to Pentecostal forms of Christianity, and about 25% of all Pentecostals are found in that continent. Researchers estimate that there are over 800,000 Chinese charismatic congregations throughout Asia. Meanwhile, Africa is home to almost one out of

three of the world's Pentecostals. In Latin America, Pentecostalism is growing at 3 times the rate of Catholicism.

Globally, Pentecostalism is growing at four times the overall rate of Christianity's growth. Or you can think of it this way. One out of every 12 people alive today is Pentecostal. For a movement generally regarded as only about a century old, this is an astonishing religious development.

What northern liberal and evangelical Christians often fail to recognize is that Pentecostalism has arisen in the global South without the history and baggage of colonialism. Churches in the Pentecostal tradition and style, with their emphasis on immediate spiritual experiences, detached Christianity from its white missionary control, and empowered indigenous expressions of Christian faith within many parts of the world.

The Atlas of Global Christianity, the most comprehensive resource describing the changes in world Christianity over the past 100 years, puts it this way:

Pentecostalism...became the main contributor to the reshaping of Christianity from a predominantly Western to a predominantly non-Western phenomenon in the twentieth century.¹

Of course, “Pentecostal” is an elastic term, and other newer forms of spiritually expressive Christianity have also taken root in the soil of world Christianity. African Instituted Churches, begun in Africa by Africans, rather than as part of the Western missionary enterprise continue to grow, along with other forms of Christianity highly contextualized to various non-Western cultures. The overall picture is a spiritual landscape of world Christianity that has been rapidly changing by all these new movements.

Many in the ecumenical community view these trends with alarm. They worry that growing forms of Pentecostal expressions of faith around the world forsake the biblical call to social justice for all, and to protect the gift of God’s creation, in favor of an individualistic piety that retreats from the world. Surely, this is an honest and probing concern rooted in a clear ecumenical understanding of witness and mission.

Yet, the ecumenical principles of dialogue and mutual understanding need to be applied here. We should listen and learn carefully from the actual lived experience of Pentecostal communities, and from their own testimonies. Further, we should give attention to researchers who have studied these communities. Scholars like Donald E. Miller and Tetsunao Yamamori in Global Pentecostalism: The New Face of Christian

Social Engagementⁱⁱ point to the widespread participation of those on the margins of society in Pentecostal communities, and the resulting sense of social empowerment.

When I attended the Pentecostal World Conference in Kuala Lumpur in late 2013 as an ecumenical guest, I was impressed by a presentation from Ivan Satyavrata who heads an Assemblies of God ministry in Kolkata (Calcutta) India. Titled “Power to the Poor: The Pentecostal Tradition of Social Engagement,” he argued persuasively how empowerment of the marginalized in society has been a key feature of Pentecostal ministry in many parts of the world, and a reason for its growth.

Of course, just like other expressions of Christianity, Pentecostalism includes widely diverse voices and examples of social witness—or the lack of it. But it is the case that while liberation theology rightly proclaimed the option for the poor, the poor themselves have opted largely for Pentecostalism. It is crucial for the broader church community to ask why this is so.

Implications

Observers of the changing landscape of world Christianity will conclude that Pentecostalism has empowered the most effective missionary movement, in terms of the growth of Christianity, in the last half century. Numbering now around 600

million people, the Pentecostal community now totals more than the 500 million believers who constitute the membership of all the WCC churches.

The Theological Landscape

As world Christianity relocates itself geographically, and displays new forms of spirituality, its foundational theological framework is also shifting. Andrew Walls, one of the pioneers in tracing the pilgrimage of world Christianity, expresses it this way:

The most striking feature of Christianity at the beginning of the third millennium is that it is predominantly a non-Western religion.... We have long been used to a Christian theology that was shaped by the interaction of Christian faith with Greek philosophy and Roman law.... These forms have become so familiar and established that we have come to think of them as the normal and characteristic forms of Christianity. In the coming century we can expect an accelerated process of new development arising from Christian interaction with the ancient cultures of Africa and Asia, an interaction now in progress but with much further to go.ⁱⁱⁱ

We can think further about the changing theological landscape in the following way. As Christianity has now become a predominantly non-Western religion, it has moved out of the framework of Western culture and the Enlightenment which has served as its theological home for about 400 years. As world

Christianity makes this transition, we can identify, as broad generalizations, some key movements:

- The Individual and Community: Enlightenment thought focused on the primacy of the individual in understanding the political, social, and economic order. Non-western cultures often begin with the primacy of the community, stressing the values of belonging and mutual relationships.
- Rational and Supernatural Approaches to Knowledge: Western, Enlightenment culture placed a priority on the mind's ability to know truth through rational thought and inquiry. Non-western cultures often assume supernatural forces, both good and evil, as means that unlock knowledge of reality and truth.
- The Material and the Spiritual World. Enlightenment thought reinforced a clear boundary between the material and spiritual, usually circumscribing the latter to a narrow, personalized domain. Cultures in the non-Western world typically assume a far more fluid and interconnected relationship between the material and the spiritual, regarding them as mutually inter-dependent.

Of course these are simplistic summaries. Further, for some strains of Christian tradition—thinking here again of the Orthodox, for instance—this doesn't describe their historical or theological journey. But the point is this: for most of world Christianity, the movement out of the enduring, comfortable cradle of Western culture to the non-Western world entails a fundamental reorientation of how culture and faith interact in the process of theology, around crucial issues involving how we understand truth and experience reality.

African theologian and author Akintunde E. Akinade describes the development of non-Western Christianity in this way:

Christianity has blossomed in societies outside the Western hemisphere and has become more powerful and nuanced in the process. The anti-structural character of the non-Western phase of world Christianity plays itself out in characteristics such as charismatic renewal, grassroots revival, massive exorcism, vibrant house churches, robust indigenization efforts, and effective lay leadership. Churches from the Third World are vigorously defining Christianity on their own terms. The new day that dawns will permanently alter the place and nature of Christianity in the twenty-first century.^{iv}

Therefore, a changing theological landscape, only briefly described here, presents a fresh framework, and a new set of questions, as we discern the future practice of Christian ministry and mission.

The Economic Landscape

My purpose here is to address the growing imbalance of economic resources, as well as the resources of social, organizational, and theological capital, that divide world Christianity, primarily between the churches of the global North and those of the global South. Of course, this merely reflects the realities of the overall globalized economy. Continued analysis of how the global economy functions, creating winners and losers, with persisting economic inequalities, is being carried out today in many circles, both within the ecumenical community and among secular, academic scholars.

But what is the changing economic landscape of world Christianity? While the massive growth in the Christian family has come in the global South, financial resources and material power remain concentrated in the global North and West. With this comes the continuing, quiet assumption that northern centers of power in the church are still in control and are able to shape the destiny of world Christianity. Increasingly that assumption, while true in some material ways, is becoming more and more a spiritual and even practical illusion.

The clearest way to understand the division of economic resources within world Christianity is this: at least 60% of all

Christians are now in the global South in numbers that continue to increase. Yet, they control only 17% of income from economic resources, while the other 40% of Christians in the North and West control 83% of the estimated income within world Christianity.

So of course, this affects the amount of available resources that can be allocated to theological education, training, healthcare and mission outreach. A major survey of theological educators around the world conducted by the WCC underscored these realities. The global North now has too many institutions of theological education, which often struggle to obtain sufficient students. And the global South has too few. One can make the argument that the single most important investment to strengthen the future mission of the global church would be to increase the capacity for programs of theological education, ministerial formation, and leadership training at all levels in the churches of the global South.

This same imbalance is reflected in the geographical placement of the organizational headquarters for world Christianity's global institutions and ecumenical bodies. For instance, the World Council of Churches, the Lutheran World Federation and other ecumenical bodies cling to their comfortable location in Geneva, Switzerland. Geneva is the fifth most

expensive city for expatriates in the entire world. The World Communion of Reformed Churches recently moved out of Geneva, but instead of relocating to the global South, where most of its members are, it moved to Hanover, Germany.

The Baptist World Alliance is located outside of Washington, D.C., and the World Methodist Council has its center in Lake Junaluska, North Carolina. The Anglican Communion, of course, is centered in London. World Vision International has its headquarters in California and the World Evangelical Alliance has its main office in New York. This list can go on.

Our theology is influenced by what we see when we wake up in the morning. Context makes a difference. Continuing to place the centers of major global organizations and ecumenical bodies in the global North, regardless of various advantages, underscores in symbolic but powerful ways the imbalance of economic resources and institutional power in world Christianity.

Implications

Regarding the imbalance of capacity for theological education and ministerial training, would it be possible or affective to propose a simple tithe on all the income received by seminaries and theological institutions in the global North? Most of these have very professional and well-developed fund-raising operations. What if a way were found to direct just 10% of these

funds to strengthen the capacity for theological education and training in the global South? I know this might give President Jinkins and his Advancement staff heart palpitations, but I think that it's time to have an honest dialogue the economic inequalities within the global Christian communities, especially around ministerial formation.

Finally, regarding the geographical location of major organizations and ecumenical bodies, we know that for some, like the WCC and the World Communion of Reformed Churches, this matter has been considered, and now is settled, at least for the foreseeable future. But for others the issue may still be open. For all of us, here's the challenge we face: we must search courageously for meaningful ways that shift not only economic resources, but also institutional power, organizational culture, and theological capital to those locations in the global South and East that are now destined to shape the future directions of world Christianity.

The Migratory Landscape

The landscape of migration in the life of world Christianity has been changing in ways which we may not have noticed. And this has deep implications for our discernment to renew the vision and practice of ministry, -mission and evangelism.

Today, an estimated 214 million people are migrants, moving from one country to another for a number of compelling reasons. This means “people on the move” are equivalent in number to the fifth largest country in the world. But of these people, 105 million are Christian. So while Christianity accounts for almost a third of the world’s population, Christians are over-represented among migrants, accounting for nearly half of all those who have moved from one country to another. Just this group is equivalent to the twelfth largest country in the world, greater than the population of Germany, Ethiopia, Egypt, France, and numerous other countries.

The chief destinations of immigrants are North America, Europe, Australia, and the Arab States of the Persian Gulf. Yet, immigrants cross borders between countless countries. Take Ghana, for instance. 810,000, for the year 2012, had emigrated from Ghana (while 1.8 million had immigrated to Ghana). Of those who emigrated out of Ghana, two-thirds were Christians. And in total, 120,000 immigrated to the United States and 80,000 to the United Kingdom, but 190,000 immigrated to Nigeria. The Philippines had 4.63 million who emigrated, and 76% were Christian. 1.8 immigrated to the United States, another 530,000 immigrated to Saudi Arabia, and another 270,000 to Malaysia. (You can find these figures for just about any country from the Pew Research project, “Faith on the Move.”)

Immigrants are moving largely from nations of the global South, often from countries where Christian faith is strong and growing. And Christian migrants often take their churches with them. Take, for example, the Redeemed Christian Church of God. Founded in Nigeria in 1952, and representative of an African Instituted Church, it now has an estimated 5 million members in 147 countries, including 720 congregations in the United States. At its U.S. headquarters north of Dallas, Texas, it has built a worship pavilion at the cost of \$15 million, holding 10,000 who come for revival meetings and other services. Its U.S. Director, Pastor James Fadele, says "... we want to plant churches like Starbucks."

In Europe we find similar developments. On any Sunday in London, an estimated 58% of those attending church services are nonwhite. Similar situations are found in other major cities. Hamburg Germany, for instance, has 60 African congregations and an African Christian Council. 30% of the members of Spain's Federation of Evangelical Religious Entities are from groups of immigrants originating in Asia and Africa.

Beyond this pattern, Christian migrants also move within and between the continents of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. It's urgent that we assess the missional significance of this global movement of migrant Christians. Jehu Hanciles, a native of Sierra Leone who has written [Beyond Christendom: Globalization](#),

African Migration, and the Transformation of the West^v, puts it in this simple but clarifying way: “Every Christian migrant is a potential missionary.”

In the church’s work with migrants and refugees, we’ve moved helpfully from seeing migrants as the objects of our compassion to becoming the subjects of their destiny. Such empowerment and advocacy is a continuing, urgent need as the number of refugees tragically grows in many parts of the world, including in the U.S., and right here in Louisville. You may not be aware that Louisville is 14th among all cities in the U.S. receiving refugees, remarkable for a city of its size. Many are received through the work of Catholic Charities and Kentucky Refugee Ministries.

As church bodies relate to the more than 100 million Christian migrants in the world, we must come to understand that many of them, in fact, are the agents of God’s mission.

It’s worth remembering that in the Book of Acts, after the Spirit was poured out at Pentecost, many of those preaching the good news were persecuted, and fled Jerusalem. And their faith was carried across cultural, ethnic, and racial boundaries. Philip was sent to Samaria, normally hostile territory, and then toward Gaza, encountering and baptizing the Ethiopian eunuch. Then, when these early followers ended up as migrants in Antioch, the church that emerged was led by a multi-cultural group that

included Niger, a black African, and Manaen, a former member of Herod's court who had been converted. This church in Antioch became the center of God's mission to the world.

So the connection between migration and mission runs deep, functioning in a variety of ways, usually unplanned and unanticipated at the time, in the history of the church. In the changing landscape of world Christianity today, we must once again make this connection between patterns of global migration, and God's mission in the world.

Implications

The modern missionary movement has put most of its effort into ways of raising resources and providing support for those who are sent to cross boundaries in order to share, in word and deed, the transforming love of God known in Jesus Christ. Traditionally, that's what most mission agencies have tried to do. And even as world Christianity makes its decisive shift to the global South, much of the church still works with this paradigm for carrying out programs of mission.

But what if, in fact, migration is a primary means through which the Spirit is moving, unfolding the ongoing work of God's mission in the world? Can we imagine how this could be the case? Can we see this as at least part of the emerging landscape of world Christianity? And if so, how would that challenge and change the

practices that have characterized our attempts to participate in God's mission?

These global realities come home, touching the ministry of each of our congregations. Of the 43 million people in U.S. who were born in another country, 74% are Christian. 5% are Muslim, 4% Buddhist, and 3% Hindu. Immigration into the U.S. has had its greatest impact on the Christian community. The changing realities, resources, and gifts of world Christianity are being brought to our doorstep. The question is whether we can receive this, and see it as a mark of God's mission reaching out to us.

The words of Jehu Hanciles may provide the best perspective on how migration should impact our future understanding of mission:

...first, (that) attentiveness to the nature and composition of human migration is crucial for understanding the possibilities and the potential of Christian missionary endeavor; second that in much the same way that the Western missionary movement proved decisive for the current shape of global Christianity the future of global Christianity is now intricately bound up with the emerging non-Western missionary.^{vi}

The Ecumenical Landscape

We conclude these reflections by focusing on the ecumenical landscape of world Christianity. How is it changing? And what

does that suggest for our mission ministry? While much could be said, I want to focus on two realities.

First, the ecumenical landscape is becoming increasingly fractured into endless denominations.

Personally, I'm one who is grateful for the heritage of the Reformed tradition which courageously demonstrated, at its beginning, that an understanding of God's truth and intentions for the church could require, in extreme circumstances, breaking away from established dogma and institutional authority. But in the nearly 500 years which have followed, it's worth reflecting on where this precedent has brought us.

The idea that any group with a slightly different understanding of Christian truth can separate itself from others in the Body of Christ and establish its own denominational structure has become so common place, and so prolific, that we barely give it a second theological or biblical thought. As we take a look at global Christianity's landscape we can't help but notice how what we confess as "the one holy catholic and apostolic Church" has, in fact, become endlessly and ceaselessly divided. Protestants call these divisions "denominations."

Gordon Conwell Seminary's Center for Global Christianity, located in the U.S. near Boston, keeps the best track of all this. And here's our present shameful and sinful state of affairs: Today, there are an estimated 43,800 denominations in the

world. This staggering proliferation of divided institutionalized churches never could have been imagined in the first 1500 years of Christian history. Our only proper response should be one of repentance.

We are faced, therefore, with the growing complexity, enormous diversity, and proliferating disunity of world Christianity. Further, the trend is going in the wrong direction. In terms of separate denominations, we are becoming more, rather than less divided. All this is happening despite the enormous progress made by modern ecumenical movement in the past 60 years.

A second feature of this ecumenical landscape is the relative institutional isolation of world Christianity's major streams or traditions. Let me illustrate. Last August, when I attended the 23rd World Pentecostal World Conference in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 3,710 Pentecostal leaders and participants from 73 countries had gathered together, as they do every 3 years. Dynamic preaching, high octane worship, and numerous workshops filled the time at Calvary Church, a Pentecostal mega-church whose pastor, Prince Guneratnum, serves as the current President of the Pentecostal World Fellowship.

But the Pentecostal world lives mostly within its own bubble, and those outside of it—both from other Christian communities

and the media—remain largely insulated from a deeper knowledge and understanding of its dynamics.

Less than three months later I joined with about 3,000 official participants and many more Korean visitors at the WCC's 10th Assembly in Busan. This gathering was more ecumenically expansive, representing the churches that make up the fellowship of the ecumenical movement as well as other visitors.

Yet, what struck me was how the gatherings in Kuala Lumpur and Busan represented two very separate worlds. It's as if these two Christian environments have been hermetically sealed off from one another, almost in a state of ecclesiological apartheid. For instance, I'm sure that there were not even 50 people in the world who attended both the Pentecostal World Conference and the WCC Assembly. Yet, for the sake of God's mission in the world, the Pentecostal and ecumenical worlds need one another in the journey of Christian unity and mission.

Thus, the ecumenical landscape of world Christianity faces divisions not simply of doctrine and historical traditions. Rather, these divisions within the world-wide body of Christ are continually reinforced, on a daily basis, through institutional power at local, national, regional, and global levels that keep the vast majority of Christians, congregations, denominations, and

organizations functioning within their separate worlds, isolated from the other major streams of world Christianity.

There are, however, some places of hope. One way to bridge these major denominational and institutional divides permeating world Christianity is to establish a safe space which gathers those representing the full breadth of the global Christian community. We see that in the emergence of Christian Churches Together in USA. For the first time, official representatives of mainline Protestant denominations, Orthodox churches, some Historic Black Churches, Evangelical and Pentecostal churches, and the Roman Catholic Church have been gathered together in a place of fellowship and witness.

On a world-wide level, this same vision has been the calling and purpose of the Global Christian Forum. Begun as an initiative emerging out of the World Council of Churches at its 8th Assembly in Harare, in 1998, and then becoming autonomous, the Global Christian Forum has become a fresh and credible movement that offers a way forward that transcends these divisions.

The Pentecostal World Fellowship, the World Council of Churches, the World Evangelical Alliance, and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity at the Vatican are the four key organizations now jointly supporting the Global Christian Forum. Nearly all the Christian World Communions—the

Lutheran World Federation, the Mennonite World Conference, the World Communion of Reformed Churches, the Organization of African Instituted Churches and several others—support this initiative in tangible ways as well.

Two global gatherings have been held—in Limuru, Kenya in 2007 and Manado Indonesia in 2011—along with several regional meetings and other consultations. At all of its gatherings, half of the participants are Pentecostals and evangelicals that have not taken part previously in such ecumenical events. As its starting point, the Global Christian Forum always invites each participant to share the story of his or her personal journey of faith, a process which breaks down existing stereotypes and establishes a climate of trust.

The Global Christian Forum is a very modest and fragile initiative. It has only one staff person, and an annual budget of little more than US \$200,000. In the face of the overwhelming complexity and diversity of world Christianity, it seems like a mustard seed. But one hopes it could grow and flourish.

And there are other signs of hope as well on the horizon of the ecumenical landscape of world Christianity. Most notable is Pope Francis. The words he shares, and actions that he symbolizes, are creating a climate for ecumenical relations between the Catholic and non-Catholic parts of Christ's body that

has not been seen since Vatican II. Despite all the theological discussion and controversy around how we understand the role of the Bishop of Rome, no one can deny the “convening” potential of this office, especially as it is being exercised by Pope Francis. Thus we may hope, and also act, in expectation of new avenues that can transcend one of world Christianity’s most fundamental divisions.

The New Ecumenical Frontier in Cities

Immigrants find their new homes both within major cities but also in suburbs. Chicago, for instance, has 590,000 immigrants in its city limits, but 984,000 foreign born residents live in Chicago’s suburbs.^{vii} The fact is that nearly any of the major metropolitan areas of the United States are home to concentrated groups of foreign residents.

The last decade has also witnessed the rapid growth of immigrants in several cities through the middle of the country. Charlotte, Raleigh, Nashville, and Indianapolis all had more than 100,000 foreign born residents by 2010. Here in Kentucky, the total immigrant population is around 140,000 to 150,000. While small compared to other states, the rate of growth of Kentucky’s immigrant population between 2010 and 2012 was 70%--a faster

growth rate than all but six other states. We can assume that this rate is continuing.

Recall that about two-thirds of these immigrants are Christians, and thus are establishing mono-ethnic congregations, joining multiracial churches, and finding ways to nurture and deepen their faith with the community of believers across the cities of this state and throughout the nation. And in my view, all this represents the new ecumenical frontier of our time.

If this challenge is to be taken seriously, what would we do? How would we go about building new bonds of fellowship for our witness and mission? Here are the steps I'd suggest:

1. Discover who is there.

The first step is to discover the immigrant congregations that already are there, but unnoticed and neglected. As we've already seen, that requires attentive work. Then, like all ecumenical efforts, the beginning point is building relationships of trust. Any fundraiser will tell you that "people give to people," not to an organization that lacks a personal connection to them. That same is true in ecumenical work. People—including pastors and denominational leaders—join an ecumenical fellowship or council because they have developed trusted relationships with the people who are its key leaders. Relationships continue to define the foundation for any fresh effort to discover and make visible the unity of the church.

2. Listen to one another's stories of faith.

Next, beginning such a fresh initiative among those who have been unacquainted with one another, such as Orthodox priests, evangelical personalities, Korean pastors, Hispanic Pentecostals, African independent church leaders, Catholic bishops, Methodist ministers, African-American pastors, Lutheran bishops, Indonesian Presbyterians, Nigerian Baptists, Coptic Orthodox Christians, and Kenyan Anglicans requires listening to one another's stories of their Christian pilgrimage.

The practice of sharing those stories, as we discovered in the formation of the Global Christian Forum, is a simple yet powerful way to build trust which can transcend, or at least suspend, the multiple stereotypes, mistaken assumptions, and unspoken judgments which most will bring into the room. That practice should become a regular feature of such an initiative.

3. Enter into theological dialogue.

Then, as trust begins to grow and the bonds of community begin to feel secure enough to be tested, such an emerging ecumenical body can enter into activities they can do together. These are not in a sequential or prioritized order. One is deep theological exchange. The need for in depth theological encounters between the churches today that define world Christianity, and which are present in urban areas, is essential.

4. Work together for justice in the community.

Next, possibilities of working together addressing specific areas of injustice, violence, and suffering within one's city should be embraced. This might be immigration issues, poverty, or hunger. The possibility of common ground for action in some of these areas is wider than what some might assume. And when nearly all the churches in a city are united around a common social issue, they have a significant capacity to make a difference for the sake of God's Kingdom.

5. Explore common mission and evangelism.

Such a growing fellowship should explore areas of common witness, mission and evangelism. Here is where the interchange can become especially engaging and creative. Many of the immigrant congregations in cities bring the sense that they are part of a plan for carrying out God's mission in the U.S., which they experience as a materialistic, hedonistic, secularized society. Some have been sent with that explicit purpose. Sharing that missional call with others and discovering how churches well established in this culture respond, will be mutually enriching for all, and for the sake of God's mission.

6. Worship and pray together.

Finally, all these actions must be undergirded by worship, prayer, and celebration. Once again, that presents deep challenges, but such a group will discover that some of its richest experiences come as they learn how to pray and worship together.

So the invitation is simply to walk together, with old and new partners, on a common pilgrimage. In this post-Resurrection period, we can remember the two disciples walking together to Emmaus, as we share with each other “all that is happening” in our common attempts to follow Jesus. When you have accompanied one another faithfully and honestly, and come to a table to eat together, in unexpected grace-filled moments, you will suddenly know the very real presence of Christ in your communion with one another. Then you will race to tell others.

¹ Todd M. Johnson and Kenneth R. Ross, eds., *Atlas of Global Christianity, 1910-2010* (Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2009) , p. 100.

ⁱⁱ Donald E. Miller and Tetsunao Yamamori, *Global Pentecostalism: The New Face of Christian Social Engagement* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 2007)

ⁱⁱⁱ Andrew F. Walls, “Eusebius Tries Again: The Task of Reconceiving and Re-visioning the Study of Christian History,” in Wilbert R. Shenk (ed), *Enlarging the Story: Perspectives on Writing World Christian History* (Orbis Books, Maryknoll New York, 2002), p. 1.

^{iv} Akintunde E. Akinade, (ed.), *A New Day: Essays on World Christianity in Honor of Lamin Sanneh* (Peter Lang, New York, 2010), p. 5.

^v Jehu Hanciles, *Beyond Christendom: Globalization, African Migration, and the Transformation of the West* (Orbis Books, Maryknoll New York, 2008)

^{vi} *Ibid.*, p. 129.

^{vii} From the website of the Government of Illinois, New Americans, “Immigrant Demographics”, 2012:
<http://www2.illinois.gov/gov/newamericans/Pages/Demographics.aspx>