



Mission Toward the 21st Century: A Global Overview¹

Ted Ward

Introduction:

Ted Ward's provocative article offers an intriguing look at the mission's task from the perspective of one with a global view of things. Ted Ward is a futurist. For all practical purposes, that means he's about as close to being a seer as one can get without using a crystal ball. Instead of such mystical means, Ward uses an intimate knowledge of peoples, places and current events in the world. "Given the conditions we see around us and given the probabilities of this, that or the other eventuality occurring, what are the alternate scenarios that might unfold in the years ahead?" he says to describe his work. Ward for 24 years has been professor of curriculum research at Michigan State University's College of Education. Many of the insights he shares here result from his work with the U.S. Agency for International Development; he has served as an educational consultant in 33 developing nations. This paper is based on his presentation to a special conference for pastors held at the Foreign Mission Board.

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We can't be sure where the world is headed, but we can at least be sure we are on the right track as Christians in response to probabilities. In looking ahead, consider three areas: hard realities, strong probabilities, and high hopes.

Hard Realities

Three hard realities should be identified: a lifestyle reality, rich-poor gaps, and militant Islam.

Lifestyle. The "American way of life" is, in a sense, up for grabs. This threat to our lifestyle has the energy crunch at its root. Reduced mobility is likely to be one of its first consequences, and the economy at large is an obvious second implication. Having operated in a period of relative affluence, it has become characteristic of North American Christians, especially in the middle-class denominations and churches, to take many things for granted that now are going to become matters of deliberate choice. Disposable income, the most obvious example, will not be adequate to meet the lifestyle standards that people in your churches have become accustomed to.

This "American way of life" isn't nearly as American as many Americans might think. It is highly dependent, for example, on Brazilian coffee, Ghanaian chocolate, and Saudi oil. This fact of dependency, however, allows Christian leaders to deal with our dependency on God, not dependency on the American, self-made man. The best estimations available indicate if there is any further

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restriction on the international supplies of energy, we will be unable to come on line soon enough with adequate domestic energy, coal conversion, or the like. We will face from two to five years of extreme dislocation, if there is the slightest additional energy pinch.

I find few people preparing to come to grips with forced changes in lifestyle, working patterns, living standards, and church giving that will result when, for example, people are no longer able to commute to work. We need to take a hard look at what this condition will mean, even in heating or air-conditioning churches, let alone in mission support.

Rich-poor gaps. Recent years of development in the Third World have produced a new, relatively rich middle class (though much smaller than in the United States). The gap between rich and poor has existed for years. In many countries the land, for example, is owned by 3 to 5 percent of the people. Serfdom did not go out of style in the Middle Ages; it is still a world condition.

As development does occur, those who benefit first are those who somehow get their hands on power. There emerges a new middle class that tends to be a power hungry group and not very generous. The rich get richer, and the poor get poorer.

In Brazil the condition of the poorest of the poor—about 40 percent of the population—is much more desperate than it was 10 years ago. But the economic wealth divided on a per capita basis looks so much better that official U.S. standards for development aid rule out Brazil as a recipient.

In the Third World more of the population is rural than in the United States. True, there is urbanization as people are squeezed out of the rural sector, but people are forced off the farms and into urban areas lacking urban skills and thus becoming dependent. This is a serious, complicating problem, especially when those urban centers are so uniformly controlled by the elite power structure.

Militant Islam. As recently as early 1979 I was having to explain what militant Islam will mean. Now people are seeing the resurgence of militancy and aggressiveness within religion. For various periods of world history, religious themes have had political meaning but not in the last century. Now we're beginning to see political themes coming out of religion again.

Militant Islam will present some very different problems for us in missions. Many are aware that the African continent has been heavily evangelized. Some even refer to Africa as being more Christianized than the United States. In terms of active involvement of God's people in the community of God, I would say that assessment is true.

But Islam is even more involved in Africa. All over black Africa, Islam is strong and getting stronger. It is well-supported; if there is nothing else the Middle East sheiks are doing with their oil money, they are at least building mosques. (There are many mosques in the United States being built with oil money.)

Some equate Islam with the Arab world: If it is Arab it is Islamic, and if it is Islamic it is Arab. That goes one way, but not the other. Hardly any of the Arab world is evangelized for Christ. That's one of the great frontiers that face us.

But it does not follow that Islam is inherently Arab, for vast areas of the world that are not Arabic are Islamic. In Nigeria, for example, militant Islam, with new sources of money, is on the move. Watch

the mosques being built in the Third World. They are doing exactly what the cathedrals and parish churches did in the Middle Ages—becoming a rallying point for development of the people.

The developing world is increasingly Islamic in orientation. That has serious implications for missions; the most obvious is the increasing difficulty of getting Christian missionaries into countries that have been relatively easy to enter in the past.

Strong Probabilities

Immigration Problems. Increasing difficulty in immigration is the first of the strong probabilities. We have tended to take for granted that whenever we can get enough money together and locate motivated young people, we can probably send missionaries. We never include in that prospect certain so-called “closed” countries. In the future we must be prepared for the fact that some countries are going to become closed almost overnight. It seems inevitable that immigration restrictions will become a problem for missions, even in such places as Western Europe.

As a developing nation becomes more sensitive to economics, it learns how much a country loses when immigrant labor uses up local jobs, whether people from a neighboring country come in as cheap laborers or people from the United States come to work as technicians. Resistance arises to any foreign company that is not employing local people. The same thing is happening to all multinational corporations, and like it or not, the Southern Baptist Convention is just a multinational corporation to much of the Third World. We assume that in these government campaigns against foreign workers, the last to fall usually is the person doing church development, church growth, church planting because he or she is not taking a local job. But whose job *should* it be? In addition, as Christians, we get painted from the same bucket used to paint all other Americans. Rarely can the North American Christian mission divorce itself adequately from everything else that being an American means to people of that country. And so much ugliness still abounds. Even in the so-called friendly nations today, there is much more aloofness toward Americans on the part of people in the know than in the past. It should not surprise us that this spills over into immigration policy.

Economic Pressures. Money pressure on missions hardly needs to be elaborated. If any substantial economic dislocation occurs in the North American community, the mission sector of the church probably will be one of the first to feel it. Missionary investment has been too much like disposable income; it is seen as an option. Christian leaders must carry a prophetic message to the people about where missions fits into the overall economy of God’s work in the world. Will foreign mission activity be the first disposable item once we reach the point where there is difficulty in scraping up enough money to pay the air conditioning costs?

Denominations. A third factor is that denominational distinctives are not nearly as important in the Third World as they are in the United States. We need to understand what it means to be a Christian and what it means to be a Baptist. Denominations are valid because they express different emphases in grasping the magnificent breadth of God’s involvement in his redemptive work in the world. Every denomination has strengths and weaknesses. Each represents something of the strength of God’s total spectrum, but none embraces the whole spectrum.

I am a Baptist. I am perfectly willing to be identified as a Baptist. I know why I am a Baptist. But first and foremost I share something in common with Christians everywhere: redemption through the

blood of Jesus Christ. That makes me a Christian first.

Denominations have arisen out of culture. We should be more aware of how denominations in the Western tradition of the Reformation church grew out of cultural realities in response to questions inherently Western, growing out of Western philosophy and society, particularly out of the ancient Greek tradition. In much of the mission world, that's not where the people are coming from.

We face the probability that churches will mobilize on cross-denominational lines in the Third World. Missions and church leaders in North America must help our donor public understand what it means when people stand first for Christ and secondly show respect, but not necessarily loyalty, for the denominations that brought them into the kingdom of God.

Denominational structure lines are crumbling in the Third World, but this does not represent a falling away. It is, instead, a response to a new generation of Christians coming forward in churches already planted and who do not see as much difference between denominations as the missionaries see.

Let us somehow find our allegiance to Christ with such clarity that we can communicate what God is doing in the world, not simply what a denominational order is trying to do within its particular carved-out domain. Thank God for what Southern Baptist missionaries have been able to do. But understand that when God takes over, he draws some different lines, and he draws them in response to local culture.

Education. A fourth factor is that there will be a greater emphasis on higher education in the Third World. Part of this will come from the new elite, who feel they must have higher education, even if it means leaving the home country. This will be a tough issue, for most of us are leery of bringing foreign nationals out of culture; the education received probably won't work very well back in the home culture. But the pressure will be there.

Human Need. The fifth strong possibility is the mounting pressure in human need. Conflicting stories about the food problem are heard, but we need to keep foremost the fact that the world's population problem has not been solved. Even stabilizing population seems beyond reach of most countries.

North American Christians should be responsive to the tremendous need for a world food bank. Also, a missionary specialization commodity that should be increased is rural and agricultural development.

I strongly believe that if our Lord were to walk the countryside today in much of the Third World, his work would include ministries of development, helping people to meet their own needs, for food and water, particularly.

High Hopes

Development. First, I have high hopes that Christians will become even more involved in national development. It is exciting how in case after case the emerging churches in Third World nations are becoming involved in national development schemes. The concern for evangelization does not blind their Christian response to human need and social challenge. (Read Matthew 25:31-46 again.)

China. A second hope is China. It will be a test of missionary creativity. The good Lord is giving us one more chance to re-conceptualize missions for China. It will take a very different kind of missionary deployment to take advantage of today's situation in China. And China is but one example of the so-called "closed" world.

There are American Christians in China today conducting English classes, but how many are supported by Southern Baptists? There are increasing numbers of professors from North American institutions teaching in Chinese institutions. How many are supported by Baptists? We have put into the world a lot of out-of-context institutions, and we have not let the churches remodel these alien forms to fit the cultural settings—the local needs, circumstances, and capabilities.

As we face "contextualization" in theology—as theology is applied in the local setting—we will begin to see its implication for institutional forms and begin to be more local about what kind of form will function.

Frontier Rediscovery. Another hope is for a shift in deployment in order to rediscover the frontier. More and more, the deployment of missionaries must be in viable forms that make sense locally. We must send more people whose careers make sense in the local economy. Even if they are to be primarily deployed in one-on-one evangelization tactics, they will need some kind of responsible "cover."

Consider this illustration: Day after day I walked to work past a Chinese man. He was dressed strangely, but he always smiled at me. I was quite sure he must be from the People's Republic. I got acquainted with him and, sure enough, he was from Canton. "Why are you here?" I asked. "I am here just because I love people," he told me. I didn't think that was much of an answer.

"What kind of work are you in?" I went on. "Well," he replied, "I'm in the work of helping people."

"Who pays your bills?" I asked suspiciously. "People back in China pay me," he said. "Pay you to do what?" I inquired. "To be here," he answered, "because I love people." It didn't add up; perhaps he is some sort of a dangerous agent.

When I told this to a group of missionaries, their eyes got wide. Then I suggested that if they just changed the characters, they had heard a typical missionary described: one who goes into a place and explains that he is supported from outside; one who says he is there only because he loves people and says a lot of other things that are a real mystery. Because of the nature of the world we live in, the statements can produce anxiety and suspicion.

One independent mission welcomed almost everywhere—at least until someone accuses them of being political—is Wycliffe Bible Translators. They are honest linguists. What they do in linguistic development is available to the country, and quite often a country needs the kind of help Wycliffe offers, and their work is respected. The group has a practical and viable "cover."

Southern Baptists now have the most people deployed in the Arab world, outnumbering all other Christians in those countries. They are not appointed missionaries. They are oil workers. Most of the families lack adequate religious training, missionary orientation, and a base of responsible prayer support. But they are in-place as potential missionaries.

Sometimes we give God very little credit for being powerful enough to help us deal with the “closed” areas. If we are to crack the frontiers of communist countries and the Arab world, we will need a new kind of deployment. Perhaps God has already provided it.

New Modes. A final hope is for new modes of missions. We are seeing people go out as teams, covenanting together to work into a new area and discover ways they can minister. You don’t break open new territory by sending single persons or lone couples, one by one, into old enclaves. You break out by sending new teams into new possibilities.

Missions should no longer be thought of as one piece, but in terms of three kinds of fields:

1. The first is the *support systems field*. By this I mean sending a person from the United States under mission board support into a situation where he or she will be part of a support system for developing national churches. That’s where the majority of North American missionaries are deployed today.
2. Second is the *expansion field*—missionaries who can work with the national denomination to be part of the national churches’ outreach into evangelization of unreached people. Some say that from now on, evangelization within each country will be in the hands of the national believers. If you believe that, you don’t understand tribalism, as much of the Third World is essentially tribal. For example, in many places in Africa a white person will be better received than an African from another tribe. Working with national Christians as expansion missionaries will be a continuing need.
3. The third is the *high risk field*. God will be opening many of these with missionary approaches that are very different from traditional experience. China, for instance, is open to the gospel, but not to classical missionaries. We need to understand that “open to the gospel” doesn’t necessarily demand that we must think in traditional terms of deploying missionaries. In the 1980s we must be more clever than that, or Islam will not be touched for Christ.

Is the age of missions over? Certainly not. The outreach of the church began at Pentecost and, faithful to the Great Commission, will continue until the Lord returns.