

Discipling All Nations: A Changing World

In the past fifty years there has been a seismic shift in Christianity worldwide. Forty years ago, 70 percent of all evangelical Christians lived in the West (Europe and North America) and 30 percent lived in the two-thirds world. Today, those percentages have essentially flipped, with only about 30 percent of all Christians living in the West and 70 percent living in the two-thirds world. Over the years, while Christianity in Europe has withered and the church in North America has struggled to hold its own, the churches of Latin America, Africa, and Asia have exploded with energy, vitality, and growth.

Take Africa for example. In 1900 Africa was home to 10 million Christians, about 9 percent of its population at the time. Today Africa is home to 360 million Christians, who represent over 45 percent of its total population. Similarly, Asia is now home to 313 million Christians and Latin America to over 480 million. Meanwhile, North American Christians number about 260 million.



This is to some extent a testimony of the success of the great missionary movement of the nineteenth century, in which the RCA played a significant role. The churches we helped birth in Mexico, India, and China, for example, have now surpassed the RCA in size. We count our numbers in tens of thousands. They count their numbers in millions!

In many instances their greater numbers are a reflection of vibrancy and vitality, a spiritual depth that many of our churches lack. While we are identifying church revitalization and new church starts as priorities for the RCA family, many of our partners around the world are already living and modeling what we hope to become.

Does this mean there's no longer a need for RCA missionaries, that we should pack them up and bring them home? Absolutely not! But it does have some clear implications for how and where we do mission today:

Priority 1: Evangelizing Unreached Peoples

Our highest priority will be to bring the good news of the gospel to those who have never heard. Christ's command to "make disciples of all nations" includes the nation of Myanmar (formerly Burma). Although Myanmar is overwhelmingly Buddhist and ruled by a government that severely limits religious freedom, the gospel, like a mustard seed, has taken root. In 1998 a handful of indigenous Christian evangelists who had been working independently heard God's call to join in a common commitment to the Great Commission. When formally organized in 1999, the Reformed Evangelical Church in Myanmar (RECM) claimed a total membership of 1,600 souls.

"We knew very little about theology and church structures in those early days," states an RECM leader, "but we had a much greater gift: the Scriptures. And so we simply followed the model that Jesus taught and sent our evangelists out into the remote mountain villages two by two. Like the New Testament disciples, they have little more than the clothes on their backs and the Word of God. But that has been enough." As a result of their faithfulness and their aggressive church-planting efforts, this new denomination has grown over threefold in the past five years, now numbering over five thousand.



In God's providence, the Reformed Church in America has been called to play a small but important role in planting new churches in Myanmar. As the RECM grew, increasingly her leadership felt the need for the mentoring and support of a more experienced Christian body that could help them shape their theology and creeds and structure their body for effective ministry. And so they turned to another one of God's great gifts: the internet. Church leaders began intensive research of Protestant evangelical denominations around the world and ultimately decided that God was leading them to a small, historic denomination in North America: the Reformed Church in America.

"The Reformed Evangelical Church in Myanmar certainly doesn't need the RCA to teach them how to be effective evangelists," observes Bruce Menning, director of RCA Mission Services. "In fact, with the RCA making revitalization and new church starts a priority over the next ten years, we're hoping some of their passionate faith and commitment to evangelism will rub off on us. Also, we know we can help them with the training of their evangelists and the education of their leaders.

Priority 2: Empowering Global Partners

In working with partner churches, we will focus on the areas where they still have significant needs and we have resources: leadership development, education, and technology.

In 1925, John and Mabel Kempers, recent seminary graduates with far more faith than experience, went to Chiapas, the most remote, primitive state in Mexico, to begin a new work. In those early days they traveled the region on horseback, encouraging and discipling handfuls of young Christians in the isolated villages.

Eighty years later the National Presbyterian Church of Mexico in Chiapas is larger than the Reformed Church in America, with over 180,000 evangelical Christians and over 1,200 congregations. To what do we attribute this awesome growth? In retrospect, we see clearly:

The providence and grace of God.

The deep faith and strong commitment of the Christians of Chiapas, even in the face of persecution.

Missionaries who were consciously and intentionally servants of the local Christians from day one, who were more interested in empowerment than power.



John and Mabel Kempers believed that, when given the necessary tools and training, national believers and national pastors are much more effective evangelists than foreign missionaries. The indigenous

Christians speak the language fluently. They understand the culture intuitively. The native population much more readily accepts them.

"The church in Chiapas has thrived in large part because missionaries have resisted the temptation to control the church," observes longtime RCA missionary Vern Sterk. "We are servants of the church, not her leaders. That means we have devoted most of our time to training pastors and lay leaders and translating the Scriptures."

Today most of the teaching, translation, and medical work that was initiated by missionaries is being done by trained national church leaders, and that is good news. RCA missionaries who remain are transitioning into roles as consultants and resource persons.

The RCA will always have a deep, rich partnership with the church in Chiapas. But the relationship has changed as the church there has grown. They have come full circle from a people who received missionaries to a church that is now sending out its own missionaries; from a church that primarily received to a church that has much to give. Would that all of our mission endeavors could take such a journey. Perhaps they will, if we really believe and live out the lessons God has taught us in Chiapas.

Priority 3: Equipping RCA Churches

In working with partner churches, we need to be as intentional about learning and receiving as we are about teaching and giving.

"In today's world being in mission is as much about receiving as giving, as much about learning as sharing. We have worked with groups in Ecuador, Honduras, and the United States, and in each place we have been privileged to witness the transforming power of the Holy Spirit, both in us and in others."

These words, which RCA mutual mission facilitators Bruce and Laurie Hawley shared in a letter to their supporting congregations, reflect a growing awareness in the RCA and a growing focus in our mission work. In 2003 the RCA Office of Volunteer Services placed 35 long-term volunteers and over 135 mission teams, both in North America and internationally. Certainly, these individuals and groups did a great deal of good and bore witness to the gospel through their mission service. But just as important is the impact the experience had on those who served.



In a day when the RCA is intentionally seeking revitalization and growth, we will do well to remember that there is no better road to renewal than mission service. When we cross cultures with the gospel and share gifts together, lives are transformed. And the transformation is not limited to the lives of those we serve.

Listen to Kelsey Newborn, a teenage member of Three Bridges (New Jersey) Reformed Church who spent a week at Trinity Reformed Church in Newark, working side by side with church members renovating their historic facilities:

The work became only part of what this outreach meant to us all. Our table, always open to anyone who happened to pop in, seemed blessed by God, as our food never left a belly empty. Many different people benefited from our hospitality without knowing that they too left a mark on our lives. From down-on-

their-luck street people to a man named Kenneth, fresh out of prison, looking for a meal and a new start in life, they each taught us compassion and how we are to serve God in a whole new way.

I couldn't believe the changes I saw, not only in the beautiful soon-to-be Sunday school rooms, but also in myself. I thought I was going on this trip to give of my service and time but, truly, I was the one who walked away with way more than I had left!

God calls us to mission, not because God could find no other way to accomplish God's mission in the world, but because we need to be engaged in mission to become the men and women, children and teens, that God intends us to be. Just ask Kelsey!

Priority 4: Embracing Compassion and Justice

As the rich get richer and the poor of the world get poorer, we embrace Christ's command to reach out to "the least of these" in his name.

"Know Christ, Know Peace; No Christ, No Peace." No one can give stronger testimony to the truth of those words than the Christians of southern Sudan, who have struggled to survive amid the ravages of civil war for almost a half-century. They suffer daily at the hands of their own government, the Islamic government of the north that seeks to impose Islamic Shar'ia law on the entire nation and to displace or kill those who do not submit to that law. In the past twenty years over 2 million Sudanese have died and another 4 million have been displaced, most of them Christians.

In the midst of such suffering, the Christian church flourishes. Conservative estimates place the rate of growth in the church in Sudan at 30 percent a year. Perhaps even more surprisingly, joy abounds. Ross Kane, an RCA long-term volunteer in Sudan, writes: "The way the people live is insufferable--they have next to nothing and flee almost daily from the civil war. Yet the church service I attended with them was so full of joy."

Since our partnership with the Christians of Sudan began in 1948 we have committed to walk alongside them in their journey. At their request we have provided missionaries to help them meet their continually expanding need for trained leaders and pastors. Dr. Haruun Ruun, the current executive secretary of the New Sudan Council of Churches and a leader of the people-to-people peace process, assumes this critical role as an RCA missionary, supported by members of the RCA who care about him and believe in the work he is doing. In recent years RCA Mission Services has also poured tens of thousands of dollars into both the peace process itself and into humanitarian relief and medical care.



When worshiping with Sudanese Christians in the Kakuma refugee camp, Ross Kane was deeply moved when the pastor turned directly to him in the middle of his sermon to express his profound gratitude. "Your people, your missionaries, brought us the gospel of Christ," he said. But Ross's pride was quickly transformed into something else as the pastor went on to ask, "How, then, can you forget us now? Can you give us the gospel, then simply leave us to suffer?"

The Christians of Sudan have much to teach us about experiencing the peace of Christ, despite the external circumstances of life. As we stand with them, and with others facing similar persecution and oppression around the world, we will know for ourselves that same peace, the peace that surpasses all human understanding.