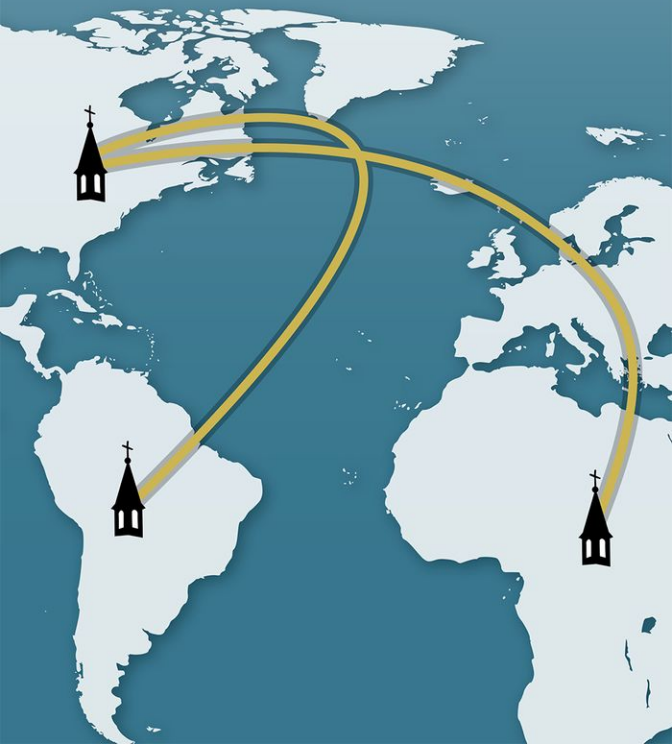# Sister Churches

American Congregations and Their Partners Abroad

JANEL KRAGT BAKKER

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Introduction

Side by Side, Shoulder to Shoulder

IN 1999, REVEREND LAMONT KOERNER, Lutheran campus pastor at the University of Minnesota, spent several months teaching Old Testament courses at Tumaini University in Tanzania—an institution that had been founded three years earlier by the joint efforts of the Saint Paul Area Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Iringa Diocese of the Lutheran Church in Tanzania. Moved by his cross-cultural encounter and wanting to pass along the same opportunity to his students, Koerner formed a partnership and exchange program between Lutheran students at the University of Minnesota and students at Tumaini University. The program was designed to encourage both American and Tanzanian students to develop a global perspective, to apply students' professional interests to needs in Tanzania, to foster Tanzanian self-sufficiency, and to work side by side across cultural barriers in the name of the Christian gospel—promoting what Lutherans call the "accompaniment" model of mission.

Several years later, Koerner became the associate coordinator of the companion relationship between the Saint Paul Area Synod and the Iringa Diocese of Tanzania. Seeing this position as an extension of his work with students, Koerner's role was to help Lutheran congregations in the Saint Paul area build long-term, faith-based partnerships—otherwise known as "companion congregation," "twinning," "sister church/parish," or "congregation-to-congregation" relationships—with Lutheran congregations from the Iringa Diocese.[1] As he traced the origin of such partnerships, Koerner explained that after the fall of colonialism in the middle of the twentieth century, Christian churches in the global South, especially those with ties to the West, were seen as being complicit in oppression. A crisis in mission ensued as many southern Christians spoke out about indignities

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they had suffered and many northern Christians retreated from involvement in the global South. Koerner noted that as many American Lutheran leaders wrestled with their role in international mission efforts, they began looking for opportunities for a fresh start. "What was happening in mission was that God was calling us over there to change what we were doing."[2] In consultation with global southern Christian leaders, American Lutherans dreamed of a path ahead that was neither isolationist nor domineering. They began looking for models of engagement that would allow them to serve and learn with their southern counterparts, "shoulder to shoulder." Out of this dream and similar dreams among other Christian groups, the sister church model of mission was born.

Based on the ideal of partnership in mission, congregation-to-congregation relationships are designed to foster mutuality between northern and southern partners. The model eschews unidirectional sending of resources and human capital from so-called mother to daughter churches by blurring the lines between sender and receiver, donor and dependent. Proponents of sister church relationships place a high premium on solidarity, the sharing of power between Christians from North and South, sustainable development, and interpersonal cross-cultural relationships at the grassroots level.

While congregation-to-congregation relationships vary significantly in the ways they are envisioned and carried out in particular contexts, they generally represent the approach to mission voiced by Lamont Koerner. Beginning in the 1980s and becoming increasingly popular among Christians from a variety of traditions, sister church relationships reflect changes to the map of world Christianity in the twentieth century and a growing commitment to eschew patterns of colonialism in mission. Recognizing that Christianity is numerically and, in many ways, spiritually stronger in the global South than it is in the global North—while the imbalance in material resources runs in the opposite direction—proponents of sister church relationships maintain that, in different ways, both northern and southern Christians stand to gain by entering into relationships with each other.

Rationale

The contemporary landscape of global Christianity differs radically from previous eras, and new patterns of transnational engagement have emerged. The following study taps into the revolution in mission and refashioning of global Christianity by examining select North/South congregation-to-congregation partnerships. Among the various angles from which to approach the evolving

relationships among Christians around the globe, the sister church phenomenon is worthy of study because, despite its growing influence, its dynamics and outcomes are largely uncharted by scholars. Indeed, while much attention has been given to the growth and vitality of Christianity in the global South, less has been given to the links between churches in the two hemispheres.[3] Adding nuance to the accounts of encounters between northern and southern Christians in which segregation, friction, or exploitation are dominant motifs, this study depicts border-crossing relationships within the global church that are also marked by interconnectivity and collaboration. This book also challenges prominent notions about the relationship between religion and globalization, which tend to instrumentalize religion as a political weapon, ignore important religious differences, or strip religion of its potency. As this book illustrates, globalization encourages religious pluralization over secularization, allowing religious groups to expand their influence around the world and to foster greater bonds among adherents.

Scope and Method

This book combines ethnographic case study with historical research to explore the sister church model of mission as it is embedded in specific contexts. It focuses specifically on the North American side of the relationships, analyzing the attitudes and experiences of a group of parishioners in the Washington, DC, area whose congregations are involved in sister church relationships. This study explores the extent to which these North American Christians at the grassroots level are cognizant of the changes in global Christianity and the degree to which their words and behavior reflect new currents in missiology such as the ones Koerner described.

In his multicongregational study of the relationship between church and community in a black urban neighborhood, Omar McRoberts describes his work as an attempt to balance the sweeping "landscape" style of qualitative research with the more intimate "portraiture" style of single-church ethnographies. The result of McRoberts's research, in his words, is "part analysis and anatomy of a local urban system, part religious and cultural interpretation, part structure, part meaning."[4] Similarly, my research method was designed to promote both breadth and depth of understanding. I aimed to paint a meaningful portrait of each case while not losing sight of the big picture. I cannot claim that my research is representative of North American sister church initiatives at large, nor can I claim that every meaningful aspect of each case is thoroughly examined and illuminated. But, like McRoberts,

I trust that the cases I explore emerge as fully developed, historicized, and unique entities that are nonetheless signs of broader processes at work.

Especially in the social sciences, scholars of religion increasingly insist that religion is best understood not as the abstract theological systems of religious institutions and the elites that control them but as a constellation of symbols, devotion, and practices—rituals chief among them—of those who sit in the pews. While this study is concerned with both attitudes and behavior, text and performance, leaders and followers, its main focus is experience at the grassroots level. "A cardinal goal of any religious ethnography," says Brenda Brasher, ". . . is to advance our understanding of lived religion, that is, religion as it is commonly practiced."[5] The large number of congregational cases and individual respondents in my study precluded me from conducting the sort of subterranean probing of individuals that is a strength of phenomenological analysis. Though individual idiosyncrasies were of interest to me, I was most concerned with the shared construction of meaning. I aimed to understand the distinctiveness of the sister parish model of mission and the dialectic relationship between North American Christians' participation in congregation-to-congregation partnerships and their posture toward their counterparts in the global South. It was with these goals in mind that I developed my diversified method.

Selection and Access

In order to examine the dynamics of the international congregation-to-congregation phenomenon at the grassroots level among American Christians, I selected twelve congregations located within two hundred miles of Washington, DC, as cases for my study.[6] As a way of comparing congregation-to-congregation relationships among Christian traditions with different theological frameworks and types of ecclesiastical polity, I chose three Roman Catholic, three Presbyterian (Presbyterian Church in the United States of America), three Anglican (Anglican Mission in America or Convocation of Anglicans in North America), and three Baptist (Progressive National Baptist Convention) congregations. Respectively, the four traditions represent the general categories of North American Christians delineated by historians and social scientists: Catholic, mainline/conciliar, evangelical, and Black.[7] Among Christian bodies with a significant presence in the Washington, DC, area, the four chosen traditions/denominations emerged as most workable and available for study within each category.

Any congregation within my geographic and denominational proscriptions involved in an international relationship was eligible for my study as

long as: (a) the partner was another congregation in Africa, Latin America, or Asia, (b) leadership in both congregations formally recognized the relationship, (c) the duration of the relationship was two years or more at the time the study began, (d) the relationship involved some form of personal interaction beyond sending and receiving money, and (e) at least some members of the North American congregation, beside the clergy, were involved in the relationship in some fashion.

Beyond the dynamics of their international partnerships, I selected congregations for my sample on the basis of size, physical and cultural environment, ideological orientation, and demographic trends among their memberships. I attempted to generate a diverse sample of American congregations, keeping in mind that the Washington, DC, metropolitan area, just like every geographic region, is idiosyncratic on several scores and that congregations that participate in sister church relationships represent a particular subset of congregations.[8]

In-depth, semi-structured interviews with ninety individuals served as the primary means of data collection. Between October of 2007 and November of 2008, I interviewed seventy-two people at the congregational level. Using an interview template as a springboard for my conversations with respondents, I interviewed an average of six individuals in each of the twelve congregations. Through purposive and snowball sampling, I generated a list of respondents in each congregation, striving for diversity in point of view, position of power, demographic characteristics, length of attendance, and level of involvement in the sister church relationship. The appendix contains information on each respondent pertaining to these variables. In each congregation, I sought to interview one member of the pastoral staff, one or two key project leaders (such as the chair of the partnership committee or the delegation leader), two or three project participants, and one or two nonparticipating parishioners.

In addition to interviews, I gathered data at the congregational level through other qualitative and ethnographic techniques such as direct observation and examination of written documents and other social artifacts. I attended worship services, sat in on sister church presentations and events, and combed congregational literature such as bulletins, newsletters, brochures, websites, and blogs. Several respondents also gave me access to travel journals, reflections, or articles they wrote in connection to their participation in their congregation's partnership.

To triangulate my observations and analyses at the congregational level as well as to provide historical and cultural context to the specific cases in my study, I interviewed eighteen representatives of sister church initiatives

or programs in denominations or parachurch organizations at the national level. While I could not interview representatives from all agencies involved in the phenomenon, I selected a broad swath of organizations, giving special attention to the traditions from which my sample derived. Many of the respondents also provided me with unpublished literature pertinent to the sister church phenomenon, which I also consulted to enrich my interview material. Within the study, the names and all identifying information for each congregation and respondent at the congregational level were changed in order to comply with federal guidelines for the protection of human subjects. Since the interviews with representatives from denominational and parachurch agencies solicited oral histories from public figures, these interviews were exempt from such requirements.

Respondent Bias and Validity

An inescapable reality of social scientific research is that both researchers and respondents are necessarily biased. As far as respondents' testimonies are concerned, it is important to remember that each person's experiences are in many ways singular, and each person's account of a given phenomenon is biased by his or her station and perspective. Religious people are not necessarily more biased than anyone else, but relying on firsthand information from people within the religious communities under scrutiny has its own set of perils. Congregational leaders, for example, are prone to describe events and processes through the lens of an idealized sense of what their congregation should be in addition to, or instead of, what is actually happening. Parishioners, while perhaps less invested in the good name of their congregations, are nonetheless also susceptible to selective, enhanced memory and to glossing over or distorting information that does not neatly cohere with their theological commitments or views of themselves and their communities.[9]

To guard against the undue influence of such possible biases, I chose respondents to reflect the diversity within a congregation.[10] I solicited interviews with both highly involved insiders and marginal participants, with long-time members and relative newcomers. I also sought balance of perspective by finding respondents who were not referred to me by gatekeepers and key informants. Aware that the biases of a key contact often leads to biased sampling, I tried to diversify my sources of contacts for potential respondents. I was also cognizant of the strengths and limitations of my primary method of gathering data. Interviewing is a powerful medium for hearing individual stories, diverse perspectives, and minority voices that might otherwise go unnoticed. Another strength of interviewing is that it

allows access to unobservable phenomena like attitudes, personal feelings, and individual interpretations. Yet, no interview should be understood as a completely accurate account of objective reality. With this in mind, I also gathered data from other sources. Direct observation and use of congregational literature helped make up for the weaknesses of the interview medium.

Data Analysis

The central goal of my research was to shed light on the sister church phenomenon by close examination and comparison of the details of particular iterations of this phenomenon. Ethnographic case study was the overarching research paradigm I employed for this study.[11] While many case studies focus on a single example of a phenomenon, my selection of twelve sister church relationships enabled me to conduct cross-case analyses for comparison purposes.[12] Relying on John and Lyn Lofland's approach for deciphering patterns within a given research topic, I looked for frequencies, magnitudes, structures, processes, causes, and consequences within my data.[13] This book is structured according to the Loflands' schema. Chapters 1 and 2 concentrate on magnitudes and frequencies. Chapter 3 focuses on processes while chapter 4 addresses structures, chapter 5 examines causes, and chapter 6 concentrates on consequences. The concluding chapters synthesize these categories to create a fuller picture of the whole.

Within the larger paradigm of case study, I also approached the material I collected in the field phenomenologically. I sought to illuminate the lived experiences of my respondents by analyzing the stories they told and the reflections they offered. Narrative analysis was particularly useful. Part of my research goal was to understand the attitudes of North American Christians with regard to the church in the global South and the meaning these North Americans associated with their cross-oceanic religious encounters. Respondents' stories and reflections on their experiences proved to be the most illuminating window into their attitudes and senses of meaning. Moreover, phenomenological analysis enabled me to better enter into the experiences and perspectives of my respondents.

While phenomenological analysis is most useful for interpreting individuals' understanding of their experiences, I also found narrative analysis helpful for shedding light on the collective experience of congregations. Narratives play an essential role in congregations' self-understanding and empowerment.[14] Moreover, the atmosphere and dynamics of an event are best expressed through narratives, and narratives are an excellent method

for describing a congregation's culture, processes, and theology.[15] Thus, not only did I analyze the narratives of my respondents, I also used narrative to describe the sister church relationships in my study. Chapter 3 tells the story of each congregation-to-congregation relationship, as much as possible in the collective voice of respondents themselves.

It can be argued that any work of sociology demands a historical footnote. A given phenomenon is always and everywhere part of a larger historical context. Chapters 1, 2, and 6 acknowledge this reality by attempting to situate the cases within a larger picture of mission history, both globally and in the North American context. Oral histories provided by representatives of denominational and parachurch bodies, primary sources specific to these organizations, and scholarly secondary literature were combined to present an account of the historical context of international congregation-to-congregation partnerships. Because my study relies so heavily on historical analysis to complement field research, it could be described as an ethnohistorical study.

Point of View

Every account is told from a particular vantage point. This book focuses on the testimony of North American Christians, most of whom were members of Washington, DC–area congregations involved in international congregational partnerships. Since North Americans arguably represent the largest force in Christian mission, dominate western Christianity, and are widely perceived to lag behind the rest of the world in international collaboration and global understanding,[16] their attitudes and behaviors with regard to international religious engagement are of critical interest. The distinctiveness of the sister church model of mission and the role of congregation-to-congregation relationships in the lives of participating North American congregations and individuals are thus important subjects for investigation.

In addition to facilitating a careful probe of North Americans' participation in the sister church phenomenon, limiting field research to the northern side of sister church relationships enabled a manageable scope for this project. Unfortunately, however, this decision also highlights the bias of northern respondents and leaves at least half of the story of each of the profiled relationships largely untold. The perspectives of southern participants and outcomes of sister church relationships in their congregations in the Southern Hemisphere are intimated throughout the book, but only through the perspective of scholars (both northern and southern) and northern respondents. This book tells the story of twelve American congregations involved in international partnerships, both highlighting idiosyncrasies and making

comparisons across cases. While it points to themes and trends that are broader than the lives of these congregations, this study leaves much to be told by others voices.

Over the last generation, postcolonial criticism has drawn attention to modern scholars' propensity to tell a Eurocentric story in the guise of objectivity.[17] My aim, rather than to enshrine western assumptions or meta-narratives, is to recognize that American Christians speak with particular voices and represent particular cultural assumptions and values. While this book focuses on the attitudes and behaviors of American Christians, I try not to confuse the perspective of my subjects or my own vantage point as a scholar with a "view from nowhere." Nor do I suggest that American Christians speak for their counterparts in other parts of the world, especially those in subaltern positions.

Outline of the Book

Chapter 1 sets the stage for this study by charting the demographic changes in world Christianity over the twentieth century as well as the evolving structures of global religious engagement. It chronicles the crisis in Christian mission in the context of the fall of colonialism and describes the trajectory of mission theory and practice that has taken shape over the last several decades. Placing the sister church phenomenon within this broader context, it highlights how the border-crossing dynamic of globalization as well as structural and philosophical shifts in global Christianity propel new forms of international faith-based engagement.

Chapter 2 chronicles the history and development of the congregation-to-congregation model of mission in North America, exploring how this model reflects the religious landscape of North America as well as trends in mission among North American Christian bodies. Chapter 3 shifts to the grassroots arena, homing in on the experience of twelve congregations involved in sister church relationships. As a way of comparing these relationships among Christian traditions with different theologies, cultures, and types of ecclesiastical polity, three Roman Catholic, three mainline Presbyterian, three evangelical Anglican, and three African American Baptist congregations—twelve congregations in all—are studied qualitatively. Chapter 3 tells the story of each of these twelve relationships from the perspective of respondents from the Washington, DC–area congregations.

Comparing and contrasting the twelve relationships with one another, the book proceeds topically. Comparison is intended to illuminate both

ideological and organizational dimensions of sister parish relationships as well as to draw out a typology of these relationships. Chapter 4 considers the structures and dynamics of the studied relationships, presenting profiles of congregations and participants. This chapter highlights the role of immigrants and other transnational figures in sister church relationships as well as the leadership structures under which the profiled relationships operated. Chapter 4 addresses questions regarding the balance of local autonomy and hierarchical oversight. It also explores common themes in participating congregations' cultures of spirituality.

Chapter 5 examines the purpose of sister church relationships from the perspective of respondents, analyzing the collective action frames that propel participation in sister church relationships. Featuring a typology of sister church relationships, it draws attention to the tension between projects and relationships and the tension between "this worldly" and "otherworldly" concerns evidenced in the sister church relationships. This chapter also highlights shared notions among participating congregations regarding the purpose of sister church relationships. It explores how the Washington, DC–area churches distanced themselves from other models of mission, particularly those associated with colonialism.

Chapter 6 concentrates on the outcomes of sister church relationships, especially with regard to the lives of participants. This chapter explores respondents' claims that congregation-to-congregation relationships represent an effective model of mission and bring about a significant amount of good in the lives of northern and southern participants alike. While the effects of sister church relationships on southern participants and communities are only suggested through second-hand testimony, northern respondents' accounts of the changes in their own lives and communities are much more telling. In addition to presenting respondents' assessments of the effects of sister church relationships, this chapter also addresses questions regarding the reliability of such accounts.

As chapter 7 explains, formidable challenges stand in the way of sister church relationships achieving their goals. Raising issues of material inequalities, cultural barriers, racism, pitfalls of development theory, logistical difficulties, troublesome personalities, interpersonal conflict, and weaknesses in the frames that undergird sister church relationships, this chapter explores the factors that threatened to derail the profiled sister church relationships and compromise their positive outcomes.

Conversely, chapter 8 describes how respondents still esteemed the sister church model as an attractive, viable, and effective means of cross-cultural Christian engagement, despite the weight of these challenges.

This chapter addresses how sister church relationships take advantage of cultural trends and contemporary circumstances, both in North America and around the globe. It considers the sister church phenomenon as a product of the processes of globalization wherein borders are collapsed and time and space are compressed through technological developments. Focusing on the American context, chapter 8 explores questions regarding the relationship between the sister church phenomenon and contemporary religiocultural trends such as the growing interest in practice-oriented spirituality and the surge of grassroots mobilization efforts. It also discusses how sister church relationships take advantage of the interpenetrating relationship between the global and the local in the contemporary milieu.

Terminology

The term *encounter* has been widely used to describe how people meet and interact with the "other," especially in colonial settings.[18] *Encounter* is a word that connotes both synchronicity and confrontation. This study examines sister church relationships as a venue in which Christians from around the world encounter one another in the contemporary period. For the American Christians profiled in this study, encountering coreligionists from the global South through congregation-to-congregation partnerships was often an experience of friendship and abrasion simultaneously. Participants sought to relate to their cohorts as partners and equals, but entrenched hierarchies and vast disparities in access to resources constantly threatened to undermine their relationships with Christians from other parts of the world.

Since 1978 when Edward Said's publication of *Orientalism* first lent currency to the term *postcolonial* in the western academy, postcolonialism has burgeoned into a robust, multilayered and theoretically diverse field of inquiry and critique.[19] Set in the wake of the demise of modern colonial empires, at least in a formal sense, this study employs the term *postcolonial* sparingly and mostly as a denotation of a historical era in which most locales that were colonized in the modern era have gained political independence. *Colonial*, correspondingly, describes the project of European political domination from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries until the national liberation movements of the 1960s. The field of postcolonial studies has unearthed important debates and made valuable contributions to scholarship and cultural reflection, but venturing into the theoretical territory of postcolonialism was largely outside the scope of this study.

While the partnership or accompaniment approach to mission is tangentially related to various strands of postcolonial thought in its attention to the dignity and agency of colonized peoples, this missiological discourse more precisely addresses cross-cultural religious engagement and was more accessible to respondents than the discourse of postcolonial theory.

Globalization is another sticky term relevant to this study. *Globalization* is often used indiscriminately, thus making the definition contested territory and the very use of the term problematic. But, as James Mittelman has argued, globalization is a helpful concept inasmuch as it highlights the growing consciousness of the world as a single place and the compression of time and space witnessed by the contemporary era.[20] The integration of economic, political, and cultural systems across the globe— which has come to be known as globalization—is not unique to the current time period. However, these processes are powerful and dominant in the contemporary milieu. *Globalization* is used throughout this study as a shorthand for an expanding sense of interconnectedness and borderlessness that is prominent in today's world.

In addition to serving as a description for processes of integration, globalization is also invoked as a theory of historical development. The predominant theory of contemporary globalization holds that the world is becoming more homogenous and that the processes of globalization in today's world perpetuate structures of western—and principally American—hegemony. Critics of this cultural-homogenization approach to globalization, on the other hand, draw attention to resistance to westernization among various groups of people living outside of North America and Europe. They note increasing fragmentation in the global cultural landscape. Endorsing neither the universal-culture theory of globalization nor the famed "clash of civilizations,"[21] this book envisions globalization as the potential engine not just of homogenization or conflict but also of cross-cultural exchange.

Contributions

This study demonstrates that sister church relationships represent both philosophical shifts in the understanding of Christian mission and changing structures of global religious engagement. The twelve profiled partnerships intimate that at least some relationships between Christians from North and South challenge both the prevailing patterns of colonialism and the expectations of leading contemporary globalization theorists. As sister

church relationships show, emerging trajectories of religious globalization are marked not only by cross-cultural conflict but also by cross-cultural connectivity. While disparities in access to power and resources posed formidable barriers to mutuality, participants in sister church relationships sought to relate to their counterparts as equals and partners in ministry. As respondents' accounts show, some paired congregations restricted the flow of physical resources from North to South in order to avoid situations of patronage and exploitation. Other respondents distinguished between spiritual and material capital, contending that paired congregations achieve solidarity not through equivalence but through enriching each other in different ways. Respondents did not just seek to reach out to southern Christians and their communities. They also esteemed southern Christians as saints and teachers.

While international congregation-to-congregation relationships run the risk of reproducing inequalities rather than overcoming them, they also bear significant potential for pushing against the currents of systemic injustice, ideological stalemate, cultural division, and religious privatization. According to Lamont Koerner, in many ways sister church relationships are nothing short of subversive. Especially because they encourage northern Christians to release a sense of entitlement and willingly give up power, sister church relationships face many uphill challenges.

> [Western] Christianity will change kicking and screaming every inch of the way, because we have become a religion of the empire. And we don't like to give up power. We have had influence and we have had authority . . . and by golly we are not about to give this up. When we start feeling the pull and change of being this much more organic faith that really questions all other authority and power, that scares the liver out of us. We are scared to death that we are going to lose our standing. And we don't know what that means.[22]

Despite the difficulties in realizing the goals of the sister church model of mission, however, Koerner was filled with hope. He testified that American Christians' sense of what is important starts to change on a one-to-one level, as they encounter coreligionists in their sister congregations.

> People experience fear about losing power and anxiety about the future because they don't have personal experience and they don't understand. But when they sit with someone, face to face and faith to faith, that encounter, far from making them more afraid, takes away the fear. It helps them to see the face of this other person who has this deep and abiding faith that they

are in awe of. And that is the kind of way that the change will happen in a non-threatening way. It is this type of interface that will be the change agent within the church.[23]

Side by side, shoulder to shoulder, explained Koerner, northern and southern Christians are partnering together to join the mission of God to the church and the world.

CHAPTER 1 | Christendom Turned Upside Down

The Global Context of Sister Church Partnerships

FOR MUCH OF ITS history, Christianity has been perceived as a western religion. Despite its rootedness in the Near East, its flourishing in North Africa and Southwest Asia for the first millennium of the Common Era, and its long history as a minority religion in various regions around the globe, since the Constantian period, Christianity has been securely linked to the culture and peoples of the North Atlantic. And until recently, the majority of those who identified themselves as Christians were Europeans or of European descent. If it ever was fitting to speak of Christianity as a western religion, however, it is no longer appropriate. Over the course of the twentieth century, the number of Christians in Asia, Latin America, and Africa combined grew by 1,130 percent, compared to a 79 percent growth rate in North America and Europe combined.[1] There are now more Christians in either Africa or Asia or Latin America than there are in North America, and the total number of affiliated Christians in the global South eclipses the number in the West by more than five hundred million by conservative estimates.[2] Sixty percent of professed Christians live in the southern continents of Asia, Latin America, Africa, and the Pacific, a proportion that grows annually.[3] Numerically speaking, the map of "Christendom" is radically different in the twenty-first century from those of previous centuries.

For a western audience, Andrew Walls, Philip Jenkins, and Lamin Sanneh have been the most prominent heralds of the news that the demography of the world's population of Christians has shifted so dramatically. In his influential account of the "southernization" of Christianity, Philip Jenkins predicts that by 2050, only one in every five Christians will be a

non-Hispanic white and a typical Christian will be "a woman living in a village in Nigeria or in a Brazilian *favela*."[4] Jenkins argues that this transformation of Christianity is the most significant change in the contemporary world. Lamin Sanneh likens the magnitude of worldwide Christian resurgence to a tidal wave,[5] and Andrew Walls describes the current situation as a post-Christian West and a post-western Christianity.[6] "Perhaps the most striking single feature of Christianity today," writes Walls, "is the fact that the church now looks more like that great multitude whom none can number, drawn from all tribes and kindreds, people and tongues, than ever before in history."[7]

These scholars and others have also argued that aside from changes in the demographics of world Christianity, systems of governance, mission, and culture have also evolved. "The dissolution of Christendom," writes Walls, "made possible a cultural diffusion of Christianity that is now in the process of transforming it."[8] Jenkins envisions a new Christendom based in the Southern Hemisphere, launching a "revolutionary new era in world religion."[9] Global southern Christians, distinct both in worldview and praxis from Christians in North America and Europe, are becoming progressively influential on the global religious stage.

The sister church phenomenon is an outgrowth of this refashioning of global Christianity, representing shifting patterns of global religious engagement and a new paradigm in the theology and practice of mission. Attempting to break free from the outmoded and patronizing metaphor of a mother/daughter relationship, northern and southern Christians who participate in these relationships seek to encounter one another in a relationship of equals—both churches contributing to a common mission of serving each other and the world.

The Ascent of Global Southern Christianity in the Twentieth Century

Christian communities in the global South are increasingly steered by indigenous leaders, theology, and practice.[10] While many locales in the global South were initially introduced to Christianity through the efforts of Westerners in the 1800s—"the great missionary century"[11]—Christianity has been embraced by global southerners on their own terms. After World War II and in the context of decolonization, western missionaries were often forced out of their posts, many internalizing the "Go home!" message they had received from the communities they served, and some—particularly

those from mainline denominations—questioning the missionary endeavor altogether. Meanwhile Christianity grew exponentially in the global South through local efforts. In Africa, African Initiated Churches (AICs) multiplied by leaps and bounds. In Latin America, Pentecostalism as well as base ecclesial communities proliferated. In China, despite the persecution of Christians accompanying the Cultural Revolution, Protestants grew to thirty-six million. During the same period that the North Atlantic mission effort seemed to collapse in failure, ordinary people in Africa, Latin America, and Africa were receiving and transmitting the gospel at a grassroots level, and the gospel was retranslated into the cultural modes that cohered with the worldview and ethos of local situations.[12] Dana Robert and Lamin Sanneh both point to the power of reading the Bible in the vernacular in this indigenization process. In their translation of the Bible into local languages and their promotion of literacy, western missionaries had paved the way for nationals to receive the gospel. Once nationals had access to the scriptures in their own idiom, they were empowered to make the faith their own. Similarly, the emphasis on "freedom in the Spirit" within the Pentecostal movement allowed for flexibility in different social and cultural contexts.[13] Rather than functioning as an import, Christianity was incarnated in local cultures.[14]

Because of its thorough integration into local contexts in the global South, the character of the Christian faith in the Southern Hemisphere has departed from versions of the faith represented by western missionaries and, indeed, dominant forms of the religion in the North Atlantic at large. Although Christianity is specifically and uniquely embodied in each culture, some general patterns can be discerned. Writing about the spread of evangelicalism in the global South, historian David Martin draws attention to the strength of spiritism outside the West. Regardless of their stripe, Christians in the global South take spiritual warfare seriously and often literally. Pentecostals and evangelicals in particular, whose ranks have swelled most dramatically in the global South, have been largely cut loose from western structures of professionalization and legitimation and are generally indifferent to the liberal western intelligentsia. Christians in the global South tend to fuse ancient and postmodern, see reality in binary terms, and believe that God blesses the faithful in material ways.[15] Jenkins describes the dominant culture in emerging world Christianity as "traditionalist, orthodox, and supernatural," having more in common with the culture of medieval or early modern Europe than with contemporary western culture.[16] In *The New Faces of Christianity*, Jenkins points to a biblical literalism and traditionalism in the global South which differs markedly from the prevailing liberal interpretation of the Bible in the North.[17]

Despite the clashes of worldview that are readily apparent within global Christianity, global southern clerics are assuming new ascendancy in the church in the West and the church at large. With the 2013 election of Argentine cardinal Jorge Bergoglio to the papacy, the Roman Catholic Church made history by selecting its first southern pope. In the face of a shortage of native-born priests in Europe and North America, an increasing number of African, Latin American, and Asian priests are now serving in the global North. The Anglican Communion has also seen a shift in power and leadership structures. Africa is the numeric heart of Anglicanism and has unofficially replaced Canterbury as the leadership hub as well. More Christians worship in Anglican churches in Nigeria each week than in all the Episcopal and Anglican churches of Britain, Europe, and North America combined.[18] The African bishops represent a powerful voice among the Anglican primates, pressuring the Anglican Communion to censure the US Episcopal Church for its ordination of a gay bishop in 2003. Moreover, since then a number of American parishes have broken ties with the US Episcopal Church and placed themselves under the leadership of southern clerics such as Nigerian Archbishop Peter Akinola and Rwandan Archbishop Emmanuel Kolini. Approximately one thousand congregations have joined the Anglican Church in North America, founded in 2009 as a rival body to the Episcopal Church. The Anglican Church in North America maintains close ties to Latin American and African Anglican leadership and is seeking recognition as a province in the Anglican Communion.[19]

Another example of the growing influence of southern Christians on global Christianity is the "reverse mission" phenomenon.[20] While international missionary enterprises continue, an increasing number of missionaries hail not from Europe or North America but rather from Asia, Africa, or Latin America.[21] Seventh-Day Adventists, for example, send international missionaries from nearly all of the 204 countries in which the church has a presence. Among Adventists, there are as many non-North Americans serving in North America as there are North Americans serving around the world.[22] Arguably, the leading missionary nation is now South Korea, which sends out a remarkably large number of missionaries in proportion to its population.[23] In every continent there are now hundreds of Korean missionaries. The Korean Research Institute for Missions reported that in 2008 there were 18,035 Korean missionaries (up from only ninety-three in 1979) serving in 177 countries around the globe. The mission field of these missionaries is overwhelmingly local people in the countries served rather than Korean immigrants in these countries.[24] Brazil and Nigeria also send scores of missionaries around the globe, and Europe

now receives more missionaries than Africa.[25] According to Claudia Währisch-Oblau, Europe is home to

> hundreds or even thousands of African, Asian, and Latin American Pentecostal and Charismatic migrant churches which do not see themselves so much as 'diaspora churches', as a 'home away from home' for their members; but rather as part of the outreach movement of the *missio Dei*.[26]

While Africa, Latin America, Asia, and Oceania still receive more missionaries than they commission, these four continents send out and support more than one hundred thousand foreign missionaries. And although the United States continues to send out the most missionaries around the globe, it is also the country that receives the most missionaries from other lands.[27] While many of the missionaries that the United States receives minister to immigrants or expatriate communities, others specifically target native-born populations. Considering American culture to be post-Christian, these missionaries aim to re-evangelize unchurched Anglo-Americans.[28] Of course, in addition to North-South and South-North mission, there is also South-South mission (e.g., Brazilians in Mozambique) and North-North mission (e.g. Americans in France), making mission today truly from everywhere to everywhere.

European and North American Responses to the Rise of Southern Christianity

While global southerners are embracing a changing reality, inhabitants of the North Atlantic are often surprised to discover the shifting centers of gravity for the Christian religion. "Few developments in our day have been more striking and less anticipated than the emergence of Christianity as a world religion," writes Lamin Sanneh. World Christianity's thrust at the very moment of colonialism's demise combined with its record of prosperity apart from European denominational structures especially lend a dramatic appearance to the phenomenon.[29] In the century that has elapsed since the heralded World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh in 1910, Christian history has unfolded in a way that the conference participants never would have predicted. While the Edinburgh delegates had identified cooperation between the missionary-sending nations as key to world evangelization, missionary-receiving nations ended up taking on the torch of evangelization while missionary-sending nations went to war with one

another. Edinburgh delegates predicted that young volunteers from Europe and North America would continue to flood the mission field, unaware that war, economic hardship, and changing sentiments would pull such volunteers elsewhere. These delegates also assumed that western empires around the globe would provide stable conditions under which missionaries could work effectively; little did they know that colonial empires would soon crumble into the dust. And perhaps most fundamentally, the delegates took for granted the perseverance of Christendom as a base for world evangelization, unaware of the wave of secularization soon to take over European institutions. In short, nearly every one of Edinburgh's conclusions proved to be false.[30] The mushrooming growth of Christianity in the global South, primarily due to national efforts no less, comes as a surprise to many in the West.

Some Europeans and North Americans are not only perplexed but also unnerved by the radical change in world Christianity. Using statements voiced by the liberal leadership of the American Episcopal Church as a chief example, Sanneh argues that southern Christianity is considered distasteful, reactionary, and threatening by many in the church in the West. "Christianity has continued to blossom against nationalist intolerance at home and Western objections abroad, provoking a skeptical West to add the cultural gap to the poverty gap to distance itself from the new Christianity. The West limits its role in the new Christianity to taking precautions against too close an encounter with it, except where the West can tame it," writes Sanneh.[31] Philip Jenkins dramatically argues that the world is on the eve of a historical turning point, a "Second Reformation" as significant for the Christian world as the original Reformation. "There is increasing tension between what one might call a liberal Northern Reformation and the surging Southern religious revolution, which one might equate with the Counter-Reformation," inevitably producing an "enormous rift" in global Christianity.[32]

However, in light of multiple trends in transcontinental engagement, Jenkins's and Sanneh's depictions of a global culture clash among Christians is overstated. Some Christians in the West have responded to the crisis in mission and demise of colonialism by withdrawing from missionary activity and distancing themselves from the southern church altogether. Ashamed of colonialism, yet equally put off by the theological and cultural posture of southern Christianity, these folks tend to engage southern Christians only on the level of conflict or charity—and in the best case, social advocacy. Conversely, others have ignored the crisis in mission by carrying on "business as usual." In so doing, they tend to perpetuate paternalistic,