Forty Years of North American Missiology: A Brief Review

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The following article is an abridgment of the author’s plenary address “Forty Years of the American Society of Missiology: Retrospect and Prospect,” delivered at the American Society of Missiology annual meeting, Wheaton, Illinois, on June 21, 2013. The full address is available in Missiology: An International Review 42, no. 1 (January 2014), and online at http://mis.sagepub.com/content/42/1/6.full.pdf+html. (This URL was updated on December 31, 2013.) DOI: 10.1177/0091829613507026. —Editors

On June 8–10, 1973, mission leaders from Roman Catholic, mainline Protestant, and evangelical traditions united to found the American Society of Missiology (ASM). In so doing, they hoped to secure missiology as a recognized scholarly discipline in North America. The launch of the society included provision for a journal, an annual meeting, and formal collaboration among teachers, practitioners, and scholars. The establishment of ASM clarified the professional identity of the missiologist. The importance of this role in an age in which mission itself was under attack was well expressed in 1968 by mission historian R. Pierce Beaver when he said, “The missiologist is called to be the pioneer and to blaze the trail. The missionary will not escape from his uncertainty until the missiologist points the way, and the church will not move ahead in mission unless the missiologist sounds a prophetic call.”

Against the backdrop of ASM’s founding and forty-year development, this article delineates three major stages in the recent history of North American missiology: crisis (1973–88), wider influence (1989–2000), and global awareness (2001 to the present).

Missiology in Crisis, 1973–1988

ASM was formed in the context of crisis. The founders of the society fought the imminent collapse of legitimacy in missions and in mission studies with the tools of collaboration, convergence, church growth, and contextualization, four “Cs” that characterized the early years of ASM.

By 1970 the end of colonialism and the Vietnam War had created a widespread backlash against missions. Collapse of support for Western missions extended to mission studies as well. Nationalist independence movements named missionaries as complicit in the system of Western occupation, and critique of missions grew exponentially. Because students lost interest in what they considered a colonialist enterprise, mission studies began disappearing from mainline denominational seminaries. In universities the secularization of religious studies marginalized mission studies among older American denominations.

Collaboration and convergence. Although the crisis took different forms in each constituency, Catholic, mainline, and evangelical missiologists recognized they were sitting in the same boat. Arthur Glasser, for example, pointed out the common interests shared by Protestant and Catholic evangelicals. The new spirit of openness since the Second Vatican Council meant that Catholic missiologists were participating in nondenominational projects, such as Bible translation. Mainline mission professors Pierce Beaver and Richey Hogg included Roman Catholics within a “new ecumenism.”

With the closure of the Kennedy School of Missions, its mantle and social science tradition passed to the new Fuller School of World Mission, founded in 1965. Fuller president David Allan Hubbard recognized that unless missiology could be put on a
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William Temple, forcefully stated the rationale undergirding ASM when he named missiological convergence “the new fact of our time.”

Church growth. A third “C” that fills out the context for American missiology in this period is church growth. Prior to the 1960s, cross-cultural mission was directed toward nations largely defined as the nation-state. A central argument put forward in the 1960s for the elimination of Western missionaries and mission studies was that Christianity had already been introduced to most of the countries of the world, and that “nationals” should evangelize their own countries. But with the 1965 merger of Donald McGavran’s Institute of Church Growth into the Fuller School of World Mission, a new definition of the Great Commission as oriented toward ethnie, or people groups, began to take hold among evangelicals. A new strategy of world evangelization rose from the ashes of the colonial-era geographically based model.

In related fashion, missiologists of whatever stripe refused to give up on evangelization. In 1972 the Division of Overseas Ministries of the U.S. National Council of Churches organized a consultation titled “The Gospel and Frontier Peoples.” Representatives of sixty Catholic and Protestant mission agencies met to reflect on “how to effect responsible action toward unevangelized peoples by national churches and missionary agencies.”

The meeting considered issues of culture and relationships with indigenous churches. The gathered mission agencies affirmed that “Christian concern for justice, compassion for people forced to painful change, and the constant compulsion to introduce the Lord Jesus Christ to all men makes responsible action by churches towards frontier tribal societies a genuine and urgent challenge and a ministry of high priority.”

The 1972 conference “represented a new level of practical cooperation among post-Vatican II Catholics, ecumenical Protestants, and evangelical Protestants for a common vision of evangelization. It affirmed the value of social science methodologies alongside mission theology and history as crucial components of mission studies. It defied the one-sided negative rhetoric about missionaries common in the early 1970s, and recognized that the imperative to make disciples was still part of missions even though colonialist structures had to be rejected.” In other words, necessary critiques of paternalism and missionary colonialism occurred within a framework of basic support for evangelization.

From a postcolonial perspective, the church growth movement represented the construction of a new discourse that both reframed the continuation of missionary expansion and crafted a distinctively U.S. missiological ethos and vocabulary. The advent of the church growth movement gave a North American stamp to mid-twentieth-century mission studies and generated lively discussion within ASM.

Contextualization. The fourth “C” embraced by North American missiology was contextualization. In 1971 Taiwanese ecumenist Shoki Coe coined the term “contextualization,” a concept that described the “dialectic between the Scriptures and contexts of social and cultural change. For Coe and the TEF [Theological Education Fund], ethnicity, political structures, and the rapid urbanization and modernization in Asia were all factors in the dialectic between the local, and the universal norm of God’s incarnation in Jesus Christ—the ultimate act of contextualization.” With the incarnation as a biblical model, mission theologians increasingly represented the goal of mission as moving beyond the traditional “three selfs” (self-support, self-government, self-propagation) to the “fourth self,” namely,
self-theologizing. Although Coe’s position as head of the World Council of Churches’ TEF meant that evangelicals were initially suspicious of the term, by the mid-1980s the concept was sweeping through missiological circles.25

In the context of North American arguments about evangelism versus social justice during the early 1970s, the currents of contextualization and church growth theory did not easily flow in the same direction. Both parallels and tensions were evident between the early North American–directed church growth agenda and the emerging “contextual” missiologies of other regions. For example, there were disagreements between evangelicals from North America and Latin America.26 Over the next forty years, the theologians of the Fraternidade Teológica Latinoamericanica (FTL, Latin American Theological Fraternity) would develop their own holistic and increasingly influential missiology of “integral mission.”27 By the 1980s, however, ASM had become an important space for mediating the differences between church growth theory and contextual theologies, with the presence at annual meetings of people such as Orlando Costas,28 Sidney Rooy, and Alan Neely, who in 1981 translated into English the liberation-oriented history of Latin American Christianity by Enrique Dussel.29

As an organizational expression of the development of North American missiology, the American Society of Missiology began amid the tension between world evangelization and self-theologizing, both of which were key values for the U.S. missionary community. The significance of ASM was that it provided a safe space in which different theological and ecclesial perspectives cross-fertilized each other, as well as where local and global conversations about the nature of church growth and of contextualization could intersect.

Wider Influence, 1989–2000

In the era just discussed, North American missiologists established the respectability of missiology as an academic field. The maturation of mission studies occurred when missiological insights moved beyond missionary discourse and gained recognition within the larger scholarly community. Conversations stimulated publications, and publications carried the insights of mission studies across academic divides.

The “crisis” phase ended around 1989 to 1991. First, with the end of the Cold War in 1989, the old colonial period drew to a close. Just as the walls fell on Cold War political divisions, the walls fell between mission studies and other fields of academic inquiry. The resurgence of religion that accompanied the end of the Cold War opened a new window for mission studies, as secularizing and colonial narratives loosened their grip. Lausanne II, held in Manila in 1989, the WCC’s Commission on Mission and Evangelism in San Antonio the same year, and the promulgation of Redemptoris missio by Pope John Paul II at the end of 1990 marked key reaffirmations of the central importance of mission to the life of the worldwide church.

Key bridge-building volumes. Several books published between 1989 and 1991 set mission studies upon a firm foundation and pointed to a new stage of confidence. Lamin Sanneh’s Translating the Message, as part of the vitally important ASM series, was published in 1989.30 Because Sanneh was an African, he could not be dismissed as a Western apologist. His theory of translatability, therefore, completely reframed the colonial discourse in which mission studies functioned. A second work of major importance to the credibility of missiology as a field was Lesslie Newbigin’s Gospel in a Pluralist Society, also published in 1989.31 This major work of apologetics analyzed the West as a mission field and deconstructed the secular Enlightenment worldview in a way that created a new set of conversation partners for missiologists. The “missional church” movement launched by Craig Van Gelder, Darrell Guder, and George Hunsberger built upon Newbigin’s foundation. The opening of programs in domestic and congregational mission studies, and of the Gospel and Our Culture Network, gave a new urgency to North American mission studies.

A third masterful work that marked the end of the crisis stage was David Bosch’s Transforming Mission, published as part of the ASM series in 1991.32 Immediately upon publication, Bosch’s book was the subject of a weekend retreat for the heads of North American evangelical mission agencies sponsored by the Overseas Ministries Study Center in New Haven, Connecticut. Finally, mission theology had received the systematic treatment that confirmed it as a major branch of theological reflection. The recovery of ecclesiology, in light of the now widely embraced concept of missio Dei, undergirded missiology as a serious area of systematic theological inquiry.

A set of books published during the “coming of age” of North American mission studies fostered the movement of contextualization into the mainstream of theology. Especially significant were Robert Schreiter’s now-classic Constructing Local Theologies (1985) and Steven Bevans’s 1992 follow-up Models of Contextual Theology. Schreiter argued for the “fourth self” of self-theologizing, and he began to draw crucial distinctions within contextualization between ethnographic and liberationist approaches. Bevans built upon Schreiter’s typology by analyzing multiple models of contextual theology.33

The publications of these authors—Sanneh, Newbigin, Bosch, Schreiter, and Bevans—together represented a turning point for North American missiology. Collectively, they signaled the maturation of mission studies through its confirmed influence upon other theological disciplines. These volumes charted the agenda for a new age of mission studies in which missional

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Expanding the scope of mission studies. Another transformational event that occurred in 1989 was the awarding of a planning grant from the Pew Charitable Trusts to the Overseas Ministries Study Center. Under Gerald Anderson, the first president of ASM (1973–75), executive director of the Overseas Ministries Study Center, and editor of OMSC’s International Bulletin of Missionary Research (1976–2000), a team of scholars launched the Scholars’ Initiative for Studies in Mission and International Christianity (SISMIC).34 In 1992 SISMIC submitted a proposal to Pew for an ambitious “multidimensional initiative to enhance the intellectual vitality of the world Christian movement.”35 The importance

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of contact between Gerald Anderson and Joel Carpenter of the Pew religion program cannot be overestimated; the subsequent program funded by Pew was the first large-scale financial investment in mission studies research in living memory.\(^7\)

With Pew support, from 1992 to 1999 the Research Enablement Program (REP), administered by OMSC, subsidized 110 academic research projects. Carpenter administered international collaborative grants on world Christianity called Research Advancement Grants (RAG), and another project studied the development of resources for world Christianity. One of the most significant projects sponsored under Carpenter’s leadership was the North Atlantic Missiology Project (NAMP) in 1996, which morphed into the Currents in World Christianity (CWC) program under British mission historian Brian Stanley. Although CWC officially ended in 2001, the award-winning book series edited by Stanley and Indologist Robert Frykenberg continues, with nearly twenty-five volumes published so far.\(^8\) The cluster of Pew-funded projects—SISMIC, REP, RAG, NAMP, CWC, and others—had an unparalleled impact on moving mission history beyond its captivity to the colonialist paradigm and in launching “world Christianity” as a discrete field of historical inquiry. By the end of the 1990s, mission studies had been mainstreamed into the larger academic world of historical and area studies.\(^9\)

**Global Awareness, 2001–Present**

With the turn of a new century, awareness of Christianity as a worldwide religion finally moved beyond mission studies itself. The publication in 2002 of Philip Jenkins’s blockbuster *The Next Christendom* popularized what missiologists had known for decades—that Christianity was no longer captive to the colonial West and that local and global are inseparable in the making of Christianity as a world religion.\(^10\) The 2001 publication of the first volume of Dale Irvin and Scott Sunquist’s *History of the World Christian Movement*, the result of a cross-cultural collaborative process initiated by American missiologists, buttressed the missional and global basis of the history of Christianity.\(^11\) The first decade of the twenty-first century ushered in the dual recognition that Christianity was now a worldwide religion and that mission was alive and well.

The twenty-first-century paradigm of Christianity as a multicultural religion energized missiological reflection in global contexts. Nearly a decade of planning and reflection culminated in the series of 2010 conferences to commemorate the hundredth anniversary of the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh. Aarhus, Tokyo, Edinburgh, Cape Town, and Boston were the sites of major gatherings, and publications from the multiple processes are still forthcoming.\(^12\) New statements of mission theology, influenced through global conversations made possible by new communications media, emerged from both the Lausanne Movement (2011) and the WCC.\(^13\) With the shifting configuration of world Christianity, fresh patterns of ecumenical conversation became important, such as the Global Christian Forum and the 2011 document “Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World.”\(^14\)

The new millennium awakened significant missiological leadership in the world church, including the flourishing of mission research centers such as the Korean Research Institute for Mission and the Akrofi-Christaller Institute of Theology, Mission, and Culture in Ghana; new missionary training programs such as the International Leadership University in Burundi; and the expansion of missiological networks such as the International Fellowship of Mission as Transformation (INFEMIT).\(^15\)

What does the new global framework of Christianity mean for North American missiology? I highlight here three significant arenas for reflection.

**Changing definitions of the missionary and of missiology.** The context of globalization, including advanced communication technologies, has led to a massive democratization or deprofessionalization of mission work. Short-term mission projects involving millions of people and millions of dollars, cross-cultural outreach from local congregations, proliferation of “global” faith-based organizations (FBOs), and migration have become so extensive that the missionary is being redefined in North America. What should be the trajectory for mission studies in an age when globe-trotting amateurs vastly outnumber career missionaries? In short, what is missiology in the twenty-first century?

**Support for mission education and research.** Are the educational institutions that have traditionally supported missiological research ready for the future? In North America, independent theological seminaries are suffering severe economic crises. Some mission programs would be facing a crisis of obsolescence if it were not for the enrollment of international students and the advent of modular, blended, and online courses. In an age of global mobility, is it still efficient to gather into one location personnel with mission experience from different continents, or has the graduate “school of mission” model that was new forty-some years ago now become dated? What is the role of universities in the future of mission studies, given the rise of world Christianity as a distinct field?

**North American identity issues.** Indeed, in a global age, what is uniquely American about organizations such as the American Society of Missiology? Much of ASM’s uniqueness has gone global.\(^16\) Church growth theory, for example, is alive and well among Korean and Chinese missionaries. North American intellectual and financial resources have transformed the field of world Christianity and spread the framework of the “missional church” to South Africa, Australia, and Europe. Should we as North Americans be focusing on problems particular to our region, or on global problems from a North American perspective? What does it mean to be American missiologists going forward into the twenty-first century?

In conclusion, a brief review of the history of North American missiology shows that our forebears of forty and fifty years ago succeeded beyond their wildest dreams. Mission studies is widely recognized as an academic field. Missional thinking permeates church history, theology, and ecclesiology. Having accomplished much, where do we go from here? Still now, R. Pierce Beaver’s words point the way forward: “The missiologist is called to be the pioneer and to blaze the trail. The missionary will not escape from his uncertainty until the missiologist points the way, and the church will not move ahead in mission unless the missiologist sounds a prophetic call.”\(^17\)
Notes
1. I thank Craig Van Gelder, Gerald Anderson, and Wilbert Shenk for helpful suggestions to the original, full version of this essay. Thanks also to Wilbert Shenk for sharing an early section of his revised institutional history of the ASM. Daryl Ireland and Eva Pascal assisted with research and formatting of the original article, and Dwight Baker edited the shortened IBMR version.


9. European missiology was in a similar identity crisis. It should be noted that the International Association of Mission Studies (IAMS) was founded in 1972, a year before ASM, to meet the need for academic respectability among missiologists transnationally. North Americans also participated in the founding of IAMS. See Gerald H. Anderson, Witness to World Christianity: The International Association for Mission Studies, 1972–2012 (New Haven, Conn.: Overseas Ministries Study Center Publications, 2012).


11. Widely known professors in Fuller Theological Seminary’s School of World Mission who had earned doctorates from the Hartford Seminary Foundation included Charles H. Kraft, Dean Gilliland, and Arthur Glasser.


13. Fuller Seminary subsidized Missiology for its first decade, both financially and by providing faculty as staff and editors (Shenk, History, 28–30). It should also be noted that in 1977 Gerald Anderson transformed the Occasional Bulletin of Missionary Research into the International Bulletin of Missionary Research, which within five years had 5,000 subscribers. The establishment of Missiology and of the IBMR gave North American missiologists two leading professional journals by the late 1970s.


17. The Evangelical Missiological Society (EMS) was formed in 1990 as an alternative to ASM. The EMS has focused exclusively on fulfilling the Great Commission. For a brief history, see www.emsweb.org/about.


19. For example, J. Christy Wilson, Jr., co-founder of the Urbana mission conferences, believed that, by going to the country of Afghanistan, one of the last nation-states without the Gospel, he was fulfilling the conditions for Jesus’ return.


21. Ibid., 5.


25. See David J. Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Models (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), a pioneer evangelical treatment of contextualization. Evangelicals were slower than mainline Protestants and Catholics to adopt the idea. Catholics initially tended to prefer the language of inculturation; see, e.g., Peter Schineller, A Handbook on Inculturation (New York: Paulist Press, 1990).


27. On the FTL, see www.fil-atl.org. Interestingly, the Dutch Mission Councils initially funded both the FTL and FAMBIDZANO (Eccumenical Movement of Zimbabwean Independent Churches) in Rhodesia as postcolonial missionary projects. Christian Reformed U.S. missionary Sidney Rooy and Dutch Reformers Zimbabwean Martinus Daneel were important links to Dutch funding on behalf of indigenous movements outside the normal “missionary” structures. For the ongoing influence of FTL’s holistic missiology of “integral mission,” see Lausanne Movement, Cape Town Commitment (2011), part 1, §§7A and 10B; www.lausanne.org/en/documents/ctcommitment.html.

28. Orlando Costas was involved in mass evangelism in Costa Rica, but he also criticized church growth from the inside; see his essay “A Wholistic Concept of Church Growth,” in Exploring Church Growth, ed. Shenk, 95–107.


34. In addition to the fields mentioned here, mission studies and missiological insights have played major roles in stimulating the academic imagination around issues of interreligious dialogue, biblical studies, liberation theology, and women’s studies. For example, Paul Knitter’s groundbreaking study of interreligious issues, No Other Name? (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998), was published in the ASM series in 1985. Also in 1985 the ASM series published Guillermo Cook’s important work on base ecclesial structures. For the ongoing influence of FTL’s holistic missiology of “integral mission,” see Lausanne Movement, Cape Town Commitment (2011), part 1, §§7A and 10B; www.lausanne.org/en/documents/ctcommitment.html.


36. The Research Enablement Program was “a program of grants to individuals to encourage new, original research by both senior and younger scholars; a colloquium program to foster increased networking between scholars of various disciplines and cultural backgrounds; a program of large-scale, institutional grants to facilitate research that would lead to the production of major reference works and collaborative, cross-cultural studies; and a resource development program to address the critical need for collecting, cataloging, and preserving existing library and archival materials concerned with mission studies, especially in the non-Western world” (Gerald H. Anderson and Geoffrey A. Little, *Research Enablement Program Assessment*, 1992–1999 [New Haven, Conn.: Overseas Ministries Study Center Publications, 1999], 2).

37. Prior to Pew’s program, the last substantial investment in mission research was in the 1920s and 1930s, when John D. Rockefeller underwrote John R. Mott’s Institute of Religious and Social Research. Rockefeller funding made possible numerous research studies through the institute, the Jerusalem Conference of the International Missionary Council in 1928, and the groundbreaking investigation of world missions that resulted in the controversial report by William Ernest Hocking, *Rethinking Missions: A Laymen’s Inquiry after One Hundred Years* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1932).

38. This series is published jointly by Curzon Press in the United Kingdom and Eerdmans in the United States. A list of the books in the series Studies in the History of Christian Missions is available at www.eerdmans.com/Products/CategoryCenter.aspx?CategoryId=SESHCM.

39. The continued importance of mission studies for area studies is unquestioned. Numerous regional studies have been published in the ASM series, and major projects have been initiated by members of ASM. Outstanding among these is Samuel Hugh Moffett’s two-volume *History of Christianity in Asia* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1998–2005), published in the ASM series. Jonathan Bonk’s collaborative online database, the *Dictionary of African Christian Biography* (DACB), was launched in 1995 with an REP grant administered by the Overseas Ministries Study Center. The DACB has received best-site awards from Encyclopedia Britannica and is foundational for African studies. See www.dacb.org/introduction.html for background on the project.


47. See n. 3 above.
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