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The Global Church: Case Studies in Growth and Resilience

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Introduction

The Global Church: Case Studies in Growth and Resilience explores how Christian communities across Africa, Asia, and Latin America are adapting to rapid political, social, and economic change. In many of these contexts, the church is expanding numerically while operating under conditions that range from fragile peace to open hostility. Revival and persecution often coexist; innovation is frequently born from scarcity. Rather than treating these regions as footnotes to a Western narrative, this book centers their voices and practices, recognizing that the gravitational center of world Christianity has shifted—and with it, the most urgent lessons for mission, leadership, and public witness.

This volume is grounded in on-the-ground reporting and interviews with pastors, lay leaders, theologians, entrepreneurs, youth organizers, and community health workers. Whenever possible, we listened first and analyzed second. The result is a mosaic of local accounts: church plants that double as literacy centers, prayer movements sending workers to the unreached, and small congregations holding fast under legal and extralegal pressure. These stories are not presented as models to copy wholesale but as catalysts for discernment. What works in a Manila barangay may not translate directly to a township in Gauteng or a barrio in Bogotá, yet the underlying principles—contextualization, accountability, and resilient discipleship—travel remarkably well.

Resilience is a recurring theme, not as a slogan but as a practical framework. Throughout the case studies, we examine how communities cultivate spiritual depth, diversify leadership, embed themselves in local economies, and develop contingency plans for disruption—whether the disruption comes from violence, migration, natural disaster, or digital censorship. We also attend to the hard edges: burnout among pastors, the vulnerabilities of rapid growth, and the temptations of political patronage. By comparing successes and failures across regions, we highlight patterns that inform sustainable mission strategy and leadership development.

A word on method and ethics is essential. Names and certain identifying details have been withheld or altered in persecuted settings to protect interviewees. Access shaped what we could see, and language shaped how we heard; we relied on translators and cultural mediators in multiple contexts. The research privileges first-hand observation and triangulation with local records, rather than distant datasets alone. While the book features many encouraging accounts, it resists triumphalism. The goal is accuracy with hope: a clear-eyed appraisal that still expects God to work in surprising ways.

Readers will notice a deliberate balance between thematic chapters and location-

specific case studies. This structure allows us to move from the macro to the micro: from the global re-centering of Christianity to the lived experience of a congregation in Lagos, Lahore, or Lima. Each chapter follows a similar arc—context, catalysts for growth or pressure, leadership responses, community practices, and outcomes—ending with brief takeaways for practitioners and researchers. The final chapter distills cross-cutting lessons into pragmatic tools for strategy, training, and organizational health.

This book is written for a broad audience: pastors and mission leaders, seminary students and scholars, NGO practitioners, and anyone who wants a grounded picture of the church's witness in the Majority World. If you are leading in a high-pressure environment, you may find language for challenges you've struggled to name. If you are resourcing global partners, you may gain a sharper sense of what strengthens—or weakens—long-term resilience. Above all, we hope these pages honor the courage and creativity of communities that, against the odds, are bearing faithful witness and shaping the future of global Christianity.

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CHAPTER ONE: From Christendom to the Majority World: A Global Re-centering

If you had boarded a transatlantic steamer in 1900 and asked a well-dressed European passenger to describe the Christian world, the answer would have come easily. Christianity, he or she would have told you, was a civilizational inheritance rooted in Europe. Its great cathedrals dotted the skylines of London, Paris, Cologne, and Florence. Its universities trained clergy in Oxford, Heidelberg, and the Sorbonne. Its missionaries fanned out across the globe carrying what most Europeans understood as light into darkness. The faith might have pockets elsewhere — some ancient communities in the Middle East, a few transplanted congregations in North America — but the center of gravity was unmistakably European. To be Christian and to be modern was, in the popular imagination, nearly the same thing, and both were tied to the Western world.

A century later, that passenger's descendants would find the world unrecognizably different. The cathedrals still stand, of course, many of them emptier on Sundays than they were on weekdays. Meanwhile, in Lagos, São Paulo, Seoul, Kinshasa, and Hyderabad, the story of Christianity has taken on dimensions that would have stunned any Edwardian prophet. The faith did not merely survive the twentieth century's upheavals — two world wars, decolonization, the Cold War, the digital revolution — it migrated, multiplied, and metamorphosed in ways that continue to unsettle old assumptions. Understanding how and why that happened is the necessary backdrop for every case study that follows in this book.

The term "Christendom" is useful precisely because it conjures a specific arrangement. Historically, Christendom was not just a collection of believers or a set of doctrines; it was a civilizational framework in which the church's authority, the state's legitimacy, and a shared cultural identity were deeply entangled. From the baptism of Clovis in the fifth century to the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 and beyond, Christianity in Europe functioned less as a voluntary movement of disciples and more as the operating system of entire societies. The church could call on armies, tax populations, and shape law. It could also persecute dissenters, wage wars over doctrinal nuance, and entrench hierarchies that endured for centuries. None of this made the faith inauthentic, but it did bind the church's fortunes to the fortunes of empires and nation-states in ways that would prove fragile.

The cracks were visible long before they became chasms. The Enlightenment and the revolutions it inspired — American, French, Haitian — began the long separation of church authority from political authority in much of the West. Industrialization and

urbanization disrupted parochial structures. Theological liberalism and fundamentalism alike emerged as responses to modernity's relentless questioning. By the early twentieth century, church attendance in Western Europe was already declining in several countries, a trend that would accelerate after the Second World War. The wars themselves exacted a staggering toll on a generation of Europeans, draining the continent of both population and spiritual confidence.

North America initially bucked the trend. The United States, unlike Europe, never had an established church at the federal level, and its religious landscape was shaped by waves of immigration, revival, and voluntary association. By mid-century, American Christianity was vibrant, institutionally powerful, and globally influential. Denominational headquarters in New York and Chicago sent missionaries and money to every continent. American evangelicalism, in particular, became a cultural force whose political and economic weight far exceeded its theological coherence. For much of the twentieth century, then, the Western-centric picture of Christianity still held, even as the center began to tilt imperceptibly southward.

The tilt would become unmistakable in the second half of the century, driven by three massive converging forces: African church growth, Pentecostal and Charismatic expansion, and the resilience of Asian Christianity under pressure. Each of these forces deserves attention, because together they explain the demographic and cultural realignment that defines the contemporary church.

Africa's transformation is perhaps the most dramatic. At the start of the twentieth century, the continent's Christian population was small and largely confined to coastal mission stations and a few inland outposts. The 1913 World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh, which is sometimes called the greatest gathering of Christian mission leaders in history, barely discussed sub-Saharan Africa. The assumption was that the continent was a mission field, not a contributor to global Christianity. How wrong that assumption proved. By mid-century, decolonization had swept away European political control, and African Christians — many of them trained in mission schools — began asserting independence in ecclesiastical as well as political life. African Initiated Churches, sometimes called African Independent Churches, proliferated from the early twentieth century onward. Groups like the Aladura churches in Nigeria, the Kimbanguist movement in the Congo, and the Zion Christian Church in South Africa were not simply offshoots of Western denominations. They were distinctly African in theology, worship style, and social function, often blending Pentecostal fervor with indigenous spiritual practices in ways that made European observers uncomfortable but that resonated powerfully with local populations.

The numbers tell the story. In 1900, Africa had roughly nine million Christians. By 2000, that figure had exceeded 360 million, and by 2020 it was approaching 700 million, making Africa the most Christian continent on earth by some measures. Nigeria alone, by the early twenty-first century, was home to more Anglicans than

England and more Pentecostals than the United States. These were not merely nominal adherents filling census forms. They were people who attended church regularly, tithed, prayed, and sent their children to church-run schools. The vitality of African Christianity, particularly in its Pentecostal and Charismatic expressions, posed a direct challenge to the narrative of secularization that dominated Western sociology of religion.

Pentecostalism deserves special focus in this story because its spread across the Global South was, and remains, one of the most significant religious developments of the modern era. The Azusa Street Revival of 1906 in Los Angeles is often cited as the movement's birthplace, but its rapid transmission to every inhabited continent suggests that something deeper was at work than the export of an American product. Pentecostalism's emphasis on direct experience of the Holy Spirit — speaking in tongues, divine healing, prophetic utterance, and spiritual warfare — proved extraordinarily portable. It required no cathedral, no seminary-trained clergy, no liturgical tradition stretching back centuries. A new convert in a Nairobi slum or a Philippine barrio could begin a prayer meeting with nothing more than a Bible, a few songs, and the conviction that God was actively intervening in the affairs of the living.

This was not the careful, institutionally mediated Christianity of the historic Western churches. It was raw, entrepreneurial, and often ecstatic. It appealed to people on the margins — the urban poor, migrants, women, the dispossessed — precisely because it offered a direct, unmediated encounter with the divine and a community of mutual support. Latin America, historically the stronghold of Roman Catholicism, proved particularly fertile ground. By the latter decades of the twentieth century, Pentecostal and Neo-Pentecostal churches were growing at rates that alarmed Catholic bishops. Brazil, Guatemala, and Honduras saw millions move from Catholic pews to Pentecostal congregations. In Chile, where Catholicism had been intertwined with national identity for centuries, Pentecostal growth reshaped the religious landscape. Similar dynamics played out in parts of Africa and Asia, where Pentecostal churches became the primary institutional expression of Christianity for tens of millions.

Asia's Christian story is more complex and less uniformly triumphant, but no less significant for understanding the global shift. South Korea's trajectory is one of the twentieth century's great surprises. A nation that was majority non-religious or Buddhist-Confucian at mid-century became, by its end, home to some of the largest congregations on earth. The Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul, at its peak, claimed more than half a million members. South Korean missionaries, once unthinkable, became a global presence, sending thousands of workers to Central Asia, the Middle East, and beyond. The Chinese story is different in almost every respect — marked by persecution, suppression, and remarkable survival. The house church movement that emerged after the Cultural Revolution, and the rapid growth of Christianity in China despite decades of official hostility, is one of the most striking episodes in modern church history. China's Christian population, difficult to measure with precision, may

number in the tens of millions, making it one of the largest Christian populations in any single country.

In India, the Philippines, Nepal, Pakistan, and Indonesia, Christianity took on forms shaped by local cultures, caste dynamics, and political pressures. In India, Dalit and tribal communities found in Christianity a liberation from caste hierarchies that Hindu reform movements had failed to dismantle. In the Philippines, Catholicism remained dominant, but evangelical and Pentecostal churches grew rapidly among the urban poor. In Pakistan and Nepal, tiny Christian communities endured legal restrictions, social hostility, and occasional violence, yet they persisted and, in some cases, grew quietly.

The cumulative effect of these shifts is staggering. In 1900, roughly two-thirds of the world's Christians lived in Europe. A century later, that proportion had fallen to about a quarter, and by 2025, less than twenty percent of the world's Christians were in Europe. The center of gravity had moved decisively to Africa, Latin America, and parts of Asia. Philip Jenkins, whose 2002 book "The Next Christendom" drew wide attention to this phenomenon, argued that the Christianity of the Majority World would be markedly different in character from its Western predecessor — more conservative morally, more charismatic in worship, more vulnerable to political instability, and more assertive in its claim to authentic faith. Whether one agrees with all of Jenkins's characterizations or not, the basic demographic reality is beyond dispute.

The word "Majority World" itself is worth pausing over. It emerged in the late twentieth century as an alternative to "Third World" or "developing world," both of which carry implicit hierarchies. Majority World does not idealize poverty or romanticize suffering; it simply acknowledges that most of the world's population, and now most of the world's Christians, live in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Pacific. The term also signals a theological and ecclesiological claim: that these communities are not peripheral recipients of Western mission but central participants in the global body of Christ. This reframing matters because it changes the direction of the gaze. For too long, mission scholarship and church leadership training assumed that knowledge flowed from West to South, from wealthy seminaries to poor congregations, from sending churches to receiving fields. The demographic re-centering of Christianity has made that model obsolete, even if many institutions have yet to catch up.

What does this re-centering mean in practice? For one thing, it means that the most creative and consequential experiments in Christian mission are now happening outside the Western world. Megachurches in Lagos and Seoul, house church networks in China, holistic ministries in Nairobi's informal settlements, indigenous liturgical renewal in the Andes — these are not curiosities to be studied by Western academics but leading indicators of where global Christianity is headed. The theological production of the Majority World is equally significant. African theologians wrestling with the relationship between gospel and ancestor veneration, Indian Dalit theologians

articulating liberation from caste oppression, Chinese house church leaders developing ecclesiologies under persecution — all of these represent serious intellectual contributions that Western theology has been slow to engage.

The shift also carries risks and tensions that should not be glossed over. Rapid growth can outstrip the capacity of leaders to shepherd new believers. Prosperity gospel preachers in several African and Latin American contexts have exploited the hopes of the poor, accumulating personal wealth while offering spiritual shortcuts. Political entanglement remains a constant temptation: churches that align too closely with ruling parties risk becoming instruments of power rather than prophetic voices. And the very term "Majority World" can obscure the enormous diversity within it — the experience of a middle-class Pentecostal congregation in Nairobi has little in common with that of a persecuted house church in rural China, even though both are part of the same global demographic shift.

These tensions form the backdrop for every case study in this book. In the chapters that follow, we move from the megacities of Lagos and São Paulo to the conflict zones of northern Nigeria and Syria, from the house churches of Henan province to the indigenous congregations of the Bolivian highlands. Each story is particular, shaped by local history, culture, and politics. Yet certain patterns recur: the centrality of prayer and worship, the importance of economic self-sufficiency, the creative use of digital technology, the tension between institutional growth and spiritual depth, and the resilience that emerges when communities face pressure together rather than relying on distant institutional support.

The remaining chapters will take up those patterns in detail, drawing on interviews with pastors, lay leaders, theologians, and ordinary believers whose names sometimes appear in print and sometimes must be kept anonymous. Before diving into those stories, however, it is worth lingering on one more implication of the global re-centering. The old model of mission, in which wealthy Western churches sent workers and money to the rest of the world, has not disappeared entirely, but it is no longer the primary engine of Christian expansion. In its place has emerged a more complex, multidirectional network of influence. Brazilian Pentecostals send missionaries to Portugal, the former colonial power. Nigerian pastors plant churches in London and Atlanta. South Korean congregations support work in Central Asia and Southeast Asia. Chinese house church leaders, though unable to travel freely, produce online resources that circulate globally. The flow of spiritual influence, once one-directional from West to rest, has become a web — messy, sometimes contradictory, but undeniably dynamic.

This web is the subject of this book. Its threads run through every continent and every chapter that follows. The stories are sometimes triumphant, sometimes heartbreaking, and sometimes both at once. They involve real people navigating impossible circumstances with extraordinary faith and creativity. They demand to be heard on

their own terms, not reduced to data points in someone else's theory. In the pages ahead, we listen to those people as carefully as we can, aware that our translations and our categories will never perfectly capture what they are living, but determined to try.

One last note before we turn to the first case study. The global re-centering of Christianity is still underway. Demographic projections suggest that sub-Saharan Africa will be home to the largest Christian population of any region on earth within a generation. Asia's Christian communities, though smaller in proportion, continue to grow in countries like China, India, and Indonesia despite formidable obstacles. Latin America's Pentecostal surge shows no sign of abating. The questions that animate this book — how do churches grow under pressure? How do they sustain spiritual depth amid rapid expansion? How do they exercise public witness in hostile or unstable environments? — are therefore not merely academic. They are the questions facing the majority of the world's Christians right now, and the answers they find will shape the future of the faith for decades to come.

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