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Missions in the 21st Century

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Introduction

Mission in the twenty-first century unfolds amid unprecedented movement of people, ideas, and technologies. Globalization and urbanization have braided cultures together while also sharpening local identities. Digital platforms shape belonging and belief, even in remote regions. These forces create both opportunity and complexity for Christian witness: opportunity, because the good news can travel farther and faster than ever; complexity, because faithful presence demands deep listening, humility, and practices that honor the dignity of every community.

This book brings anthropology and missiology into constructive dialogue, grounded in real-world case studies from diverse contexts. Anthropology offers tools for attentive observation—learning how people make meaning, organize life, and transmit values—while missiology frames the theological purpose and ethics of Christian mission. Together, they invite practitioners to begin with presence rather than programs, to ask better questions before proposing solutions, and to discern where God is already at work. The result is a posture that privileges relationships over results and long-term fruit over short-term metrics.

At the heart of these pages is an ethical vision: mission that prioritizes listening, partnership, and sustainable development. Listening means entering communities as students, not experts—conducting respectful ethnography, hearing local histories, and recognizing wounds left by colonialism, conflict, or extraction. Partnership means co-designing initiatives with local churches, leaders, and networks so that authority and ownership reside where the work is lived. Sustainability means aligning efforts with local capacities and ecosystems, avoiding dependency, and measuring impact by what endures after outside teams leave.

Practitioners will find concrete models for church planting, community health, and intercultural training. Church planting strategies here are contextual rather than formulaic, attentive to language, liturgy, and leadership patterns that resonate locally. Community health approaches integrate public health principles with pastoral care, addressing preventable disease, mental well-being, and social determinants of health. Intercultural training equips teams to navigate communication styles, power distance, conflict, and gender dynamics, fostering communities of reconciliation in word and deed.

Because mission today is inseparable from social transformation, we engage themes often considered “beyond” traditional evangelism: peacemaking, environmental stewardship, advocacy for the vulnerable, and economic integrity. These are not distractions from proclamation but embodiments of it—tangible signs of God’s

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kingdom in places marked by injustice, displacement, or ecological strain. We also consider the promise and peril of digital mission, the realities of megacities and informal settlements, and the pastoral challenges of serving among diasporas and refugees. Throughout, you will encounter field stories that illustrate both mistakes made and lessons learned.

Finally, this guide is practical. Each chapter concludes with reflective questions, simple tools for contextual analysis, and suggestions for collaborative planning and evaluation. Our aim is not to offer a universal template but a framework you can adapt with local partners. If the Spirit leads the global church into mission that listens before it speaks, shares power rather than consolidates it, and plants seeds that communities themselves tend and multiply, then the fruit will be resilient, just, and joyful. May these pages help you join that work with wisdom and hope.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Changing Landscape of Global Mission

If you had told a nineteenth-century missionary stationed in Guangzhou or Lagos that within a century the average Christian in the world would not be a white European or North American, you would have been met with a mixture of confusion and polite skepticism. Yet by the close of the twentieth century, that was already the statistical reality. The twenty-first century has only deepened the shift. Today, the majority of the world's estimated 2.4 billion Christians live in Africa, Latin America, and Asia. The old map that colored Christian mission as a one-way street running from Europe and North America outward no longer describes the world as it is. And the mission field itself looks radically different from what it did even fifty years ago.

To understand where mission is going, you have to understand where it has already moved.

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