

CHRISTIAN TODAY

Where is Christian mission facing the biggest challenges?

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Since the Great Commission and the journeys of Paul, Christians have been intent on spreading their ministry as far and wide as possible. Today however there are two large stumbling blocks for the Church.

Dick Slikker, of the Dutch Christian mission consultancy group Project Care, has identified two major regions where he believes the Church needs to both re-focus its energy and adjust its thinking.

The first area is what is often referred to as the traditional 'West', specifically North America and Western Europe. Mr Slikker notes that Western Europe, in terms of the percentage of its population considered to be Christian, has experienced the greatest decline in the entire world over the previous century.

Mr Slikker references information from the World Christian Database showing that the percentage of Christian in Western Europe has dropped from 99 per cent in 1900, to 69 per cent in 2010. In North America, a similar, but not as pronounced trend, is noticeable over the same period.

Mr Slikker asks: "Is it not strange that so often the Western church somehow seems convinced that the mission field always lies 'overseas' and that we demonstrate so little urgent interest in the spread of or the deterioration of the Church within our own communities and continents?"

Looking at ways to reverse this decline, he suggests Christian ministries look to the work done by the anti-smoking lobby.

While the message of 'do not smoke, or else...' was not popularly received, other methods garnered significantly more success.

"The shift in the approach is from an emphasis on dire warnings to a concentration on changing the image of smoking and the smoker," Mr Slikker notes.

"Smoking is no longer portrayed as being 'cool' or popular, but rather uncouth, anti-social, and perhaps even offensively dirty. The image has thus been altered."

Apply this to the mission work of Christians, Mr Slikker argues that there are several image problems that the Church needs to address as he believes the Church is too often perceived as:

- Constantly preoccupied with itself
- Dogmatic and intrusive in the lives of others
- Being without relevant answers to important social questions
- Incredibly divided

Taking inspiration from the Bible, Mr Slikker believes that resolving these issues is an achievable goal. He references the book of Acts, chapter 2, verse 47, which talks about how Christians were viewed in the ancient world: "They were regarded with favour by the people."

In part, Mr Slikker suggests that this is because of what is mentioned a verse earlier, which describes Christians of that time as acting with "one mind".

The second challenge presented is very different, and is widely known in Christian circles as the 10/40 window.

This area is a group of countries found between 10 and 40 degrees of north latitude, and includes nations such as China, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Vietnam, Mali, Japan, Sudan and Ethiopia.

Unlike the Western world, the problem in this area is only partly that Christianity is viewed negatively. The broader issue is that other faiths are viewed more positively.

"This is the region that includes the majority of the world's Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists and which has over the last fifty years occupied an increasing level of attention in Christian foreign mission circles," says Mr Slikker.



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"The resistance here to Christianity is formidable, and much grace, energy and ingenuity is going to be required in the building up of Christ's Church there."

While Mr Slikker welcomes the level of focus this region has received from missional organisations, he questions whether the direction of most missional plans in the current climate will yield fruit.

The most successful form of mission in these fields is also the most challenging, Mr Slikker suggests: "Fruit is the fielding of pioneering, relationship-building, humble-hearted Christian ambassadors of the Gospel, who are prepared for the lonely, frustrating and often long and apparently fruitless effort required in such an effort.

"Living essentially alone among the people of an often hostile and alien culture while labouring to build up a one-on-one reservoir of inter-personal trust based on demonstrated respect and love."

Possibly because of these difficulties, this is not the type of mission favoured by most people: "Unfortunately however, in our own experience in carrying out a survey among young people attending a recent European Mission-Net conference, it seems evident that the prospect of an isolated mission posting was not at all popular.

"Today's youth prefers instead the fellowship and worship opportunities which are to be found in group efforts. There we find a profound difficulty."

Mr Slikker noted that there was one country where real progress is a cause for optimism: "Looking forward from today's perspective, Christian work in that most difficult region is realistically going to be a slow process, with the possible exception of Iran.

"That country is currently experiencing a surprisingly strong Christian growth, and is a country in which Christian organisations are experiencing many successes."