THE MEETING OF THE WATERS

7 Global Currents that Will Propel the Future Church

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Table of Contents

Introduction
Mission Marm and Apple Guy

Chapter 1    The 7 Currents
Navigating Uncharted Waters

Chapter 2    Mercy
Eastbound Footprints across the Tumen

Chapter 3    Mutuality
The Barefoot Indian and Upside-Down Maps

Chapter 4    Migration
The Emerald Isle-- from Doormat to Welcome Mat

Chapter 5    Monoculture
Singapore Meets Swoosh

Chapter 6    Marginalization
Rendezvous with Moderate Islam

Chapter 7    Machines
Red Sky at Night...No Relief in Sight

Chapter 8    Memory
Uganda’s Historical Baggage

Conclusion
A Changing of the Guard
INTRODUCTION

Mission Marm and Apple Guy
It was 2 a.m., and the knocking on the locked iron door was getting louder. It kept coming, as I slid out of bed, stumbled in the dark to the door, groped for the ring of keys hanging on the wall. The heavy door swung open to a missionary woman in her sixties, and I thought I was dreaming. It was my Aunt Vera.

Then again, Aunt Vera had been dead for more than twenty years.

It could have been that I was groggy from the overnight flights from Richmond to Miami to Sao Paolo to Manaus, Brazil. Manaus used to be the capital of the world’s rubber industry, and is now somewhat of a global switchyard—a gritty, industrial gateway city into the Amazon Basin for tourists, business people…and missionaries. My lodging during my time in Manaus was, after all, the basement bunkhouse of a missionary jungle pilot.

Aunt Vera had gone into the mission field in Iran in the 1940’s. She wore her grey hair in a bun, with ankle length print dresses and sensible shoes. I believe everyone knows an Aunt Vera.

After her missionary career, Aunt Vera became what they used to call a school marm—an old-fashioned term describing “a woman teacher, especially one who is regarded as strict.” The woman standing in front of me was a dead ringer for my dead aunt, and I immediately thought of her as Mission Marm.

Mission Marm had the steely-eyed gaze and brusque manner of a woman who had lived alone in developing-world countries for decades. Her bonecrushing handshake betrayed years, I guessed, of laying bricks, delivering babies, sewing clothes, and farming. I would like to reflect on our conversation and what I learned about her life in the mission field during the last half of the twentieth century…except that we barely spoke. I am by nature a questioner, and certainly gave her the chance to tell her story, but she was a woman of few words. Sure, it could have been the late hour, but she was no more expansive the next morning.

I later pieced together her story. Mission Marm became a missionary in the 1970s, at a time when America was an isolated player on the Cold War stage. China and Russia were closed to foreigners. Knowing she would probably only return home every five years of more, she loaded a steamer trunk and boarded a ship or plane for her trip to “the field,” just as Aunt Vera had done, knowing she would only return home every five or more years. Communication was only by sporadic mail service. The task was serious, the conditions harsh, and time short.

After just a brief meeting, I could tell that Mission Marm, for her part, had probably forgotten more about Christian service than I had ever known. Her devotion, experience, and resolve were palpable—not to mention her physical vigor, as this woman twenty-five years my senior barnstormed around the Amazon Basin all day and night.

I run a Christian foundation, where my job is to find ways to invest in the flourishing of the global Church. “Global Church” is a collective term used to describe the community of Christian believers and churches around the world. It is “global” because Christians of all ethnicities are profoundly linked by common Biblical beliefs—even if all-too-often we focus on differences. It is also “global” because Jesus commanded His followers to make disciples
throughout the world, a mandate which animates the Christian mission movement. The dispersed followers of Christ around the world are a “Church,” which the Bible defines as the body of believers in the saving grace of Jesus Christ, and not as a building.

The global Church is also notable for what it is not. The global Church is neither an individual mission agency, megachurch, nor an international network. The global Church is not defined by a specific nation or denomination. Finally, the global Church is not ultimately represented by any one person, except in the person of Jesus Christ. The global Church is very simply the body of followers of Christ, heeding His call to be His arms, legs, and voice around the world. ¹

The global Church has long been the world’s most effective relief agent, as it meets needs in all corners of the world through justice advocacy, material aid, counseling, biblical proclamation, education, and more. In the last ten years I have visited over forty countries, met with a few thousand ministry leaders, bounced through hundreds of hours in vans to project sites, and drunk gallons of coffee, Coke and chai served up by my hosts in places where they knew I could not drink the water. During my travels, I have walked where Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci walked in 16th century China. I have accompanied an Australian nurse as she tended to the elderly in an Asian leper village. I have learned from Russian preachers who were jailed during communist times. I have been spellbound by Ugandan underground church pastors as they described private audiences with heinous strongman Idi Amin.

I have also had the privilege of meeting hundreds of people like Mission Marm over the years. These people, whose faith impels them to serve others at the ends of the earth, are heroes to me. Impossible it is to travel the world and see firsthand the sacrifices and fruit of past Christian workers’ efforts without feeling humbled and grateful. In difficult years past, fully expecting to live out their days in their new country, missionaries left port for their assigned country with their belongings packed in coffins. I can relate to 1950’s U.S. statesman Adlai Stevenson who, after visiting mission stations in Africa, was asked about what impressed him most. “The graves,” he said. “The graves. At every mission station there were graves.”²

Just after drifting back to sleep, I was reawakened at 4 a.m. by rattling on the iron window bars. I felt like I was bunking at some sort of equatorial equivalent of the Underground Railroad, with unknown travelers drifting through at all hours on their way to one part or another of Latin America. This time I opened the door to a man in his late twenties, en route to a remote village to begin his new career as a teacher in the jungle. Pleasant and casual, he multi-tasked while we talked, sending text messages and Facebooking with his family in Ohio who would all be eager to know that he was safe.

With his T shirt, scruffy beard, baggy shorts, flip flops, and compact technology, the man seemed like a typical twenty-first century young adult. He reminded me of a sales associate in my local Apple store, and so I dubbed him Apple Guy.

“I was working as an engineer in the U.S., when I went with my church to Brazil on a short-term mission trip a few years ago. That was when I ‘caught the missions bug.’ We did work at a mission school in Brazil’s interior, and after I returned home, I began keeping up with their
newsletters and emails. It turned out that my wife and I really had a heart for what they were doing at that school, and for Brazil.”

Then the inevitable happened—history, global politics, and providence (not in that order) aligned to shape the future plans of Apple Guy, his church, and that mission school. “Brazil’s government was becoming increasingly anti-American,” he said, “and it began imposing more restrictions on American organizations. A large American mission agency had been providing staff to the school for a long time, and the government treated the agency as a high-profile scapegoat. So the agency decided to pull all of its personnel out of Brazil.”

As Apple Guy spoke I knew, though he didn’t, that this kind of missionary-eviction was not uncommon around the world—just one more sign that the mission times were changing. The government needed for Brazilian children to be educated, though, and in order to keep the school functioning they would allow just one foreigner to run the school.

Apple Guy concluded, “The school made its need known, and my wife and I prayed and talked to the kids about it. We decided to give it a shot—we would all move and run that boarding school in the interior of Brazil. I was kind of as surprised as anyone!”

As he slouched into a couch and logged onto his laptop, a series of photos of his children’s happy white faces shuffled across the very large screen. Finally, he pulled up a movie on his laptop; he said it would help him fall asleep. The two visitors could not have been more different. She was single; he would soon fly his family down to join him. She was a lifer, he had committed to three years. She had responded to a life calling and had had this one career in her life. He was on his third—and almost certainly not last—career, pursuing a change of vocation for a time. She had studied and trained to be a missionary, and her whole working life had been in Christian service. He had spent his working life so far in the secular workforce, and expected to put to use the skills and vocational experience from his stateside job. She had given up all of her western accoutrements and conveniences to serve in any way or place that she was needed, while he brought his gadgets and toys with him to a place he had chosen. She had begun her career taking furloughs back home a few times every decade. He expected to return to the states every year, probably retain ownership of his house in the states, and certainly remain in constant email and phone contact. He and his family also knew that they would be visited, annually or more often, by relatives and various short-term mission groups from back home.

That night in Manaus, my mind mulled over a nagging issue, which would ultimately prompt this book. As I reflected on Mission Marm and Apple Guy, I realized that the global Church was undergoing a generational changing of the guard. In a world of widespread global upheaval of every kind, the global Church was caught between a storied past and a rapidly morphing future. Many church experts have subconsciously assumed that the future global Church would look like Mission Marm and Aunt Vera. But that night I glimpsed the future, and I knew one thing for certain: Apple Guy will play a huge role.
In coming years global Church leaders will be able to apply some traditional approaches from the past, but will increasingly need to try out experimental, innovative, and even uncomfortable ideas. A generation of Christian workers like Apple Guy will depart from Mission Marm’s ways and means at almost every turn, which will lead the global Church into uncharted waters.

Apple Guy at the helm gave me concern, too. Beyond the hip clothes and cool gadgets, would Apple Guy bring enough depth and commitment to very difficult cross-cultural assignments? Was Apple Guy prepared to minister to and teach Christian faith to people in complex and changing cultures? Would Apple Guy know how to forge relationships with leaders from less-developed, less–powerful countries? I knew he could not fulfill his task alone, but would religious leaders allow him a space at “the adult table?”

As I thought about the generational shift, I wondered if the emerging generation’s voice would be heeded. Would the global Church of the future incorporate the new generation’s focus on justice, relief, poverty, conservation and mercy? Christian workers in the past had focused primarily on individual needs and spiritual concerns but, as a British journalist recently noted, young Christians today are “as concerned with ecology, AIDS…and with human rights worldwide as with traditional questions of personal morality.” I felt certain that Mission Marm could not effectively advance those emerging concerns, but I also had my doubts about Apple Guy.

Right now, over 400,000 Christian missionaries are living in countries other than their own, carrying a message or delivering a service to the ends of the earth. I am, wherever I go, almost a kneejerk defender of the work of the Christian Church around the world. The good work done by Christians over the years—the hospitals and schools built, the sick people treated, the science and agriculture taught, the souls saved—far eclipses any negative history. Working for American donors who help the Christian Church to serve the world, the last thing I want to see is disheartened or discouraged Christian workers.

But I believe that Mission Marm’s days are waning, and that the future of the global Church will look very different. When hockey great Wayne Gretzky was asked why he always got to the puck first, he said, “I don’t skate to where the puck is; I skate to where the puck is going to be.” I wondered, that night in the bunkhouse, if the global Church was skating to where the puck was going to be.

Others share my concerns. I read a report by an international panel of church experts charging that, all too often, global Church leaders do long-range planning as if the future is simply going to be an extension of the present. The report questioned whether the Christian Church has the ability or desire to recognize a world in flux and figure out how to respond. Another writer called for global Church leaders to become “incredibly well-versed in the ways that globalization affects their particular field… (for) turning a blind eye to the issue is incredibly dangerous…” That is why I have written *The Meeting of the Waters*—to address the issues of globalization and the Church head-on.
My reason for being in Manaus, Brazil was to visit an aviation ministry that flies supplies and teachers to remote Amazon River villages. Since planes were the ministry’s “business,” the workers decided that an actual flight downriver would give me the best firsthand experience.

Early that morning I was picked up and driven to Manaus-Eduardo Gomes International Airport. I did indeed learn a few things about aviation ministry. To my surprise, though, the greatest fruit of my time there was much more sweeping. What had been a lingering hunch about the church in the twenty-first century became for me a consuming quest.

As we flew over the sprawling port city and then countless river villages, I thought about Christian presence in those places below …and around the world. From the air, those remote villages looked just like they must have appeared one, two, or even three hundred years ago. In reality, though, villages like the ones below me were changing all around the world, as globalization advanced at a rapid pace. I saw that, even as some villagers poled to and fro in dugout canoes, many others talked on cellphones to their friends and relatives in other villages and cities.

I wondered whether either Mission Marm or Apple Guy would be effective in those kinds of river villages today. Or in cities like Sao Paolo, Bangkok, Phoenix or even Manaus, for that matter. As those places morphed, I knew, so must Mission Marm and Apple Guy and the rest of the global Church.

In our six-seater float plane, we touched down in several of the river villages to visit indigenous churches and pastors. We traipsed barefoot through knee-deep mud and muck and navigated rickety boardwalks, between shacks on stilts with ramps leading from the tied-up canoes and motorboats to the front door. We visited a church that met in a screened-in hut, which doubled as a community lodge where the village men watched soccer matches on satellite television. It might be an Amazonian river village but, after all, it was still soccer-mad Brazil.

Flying back upriver to Manaus, our plane banked over the city to see a local landmark. In Manaus, two distinct eastbound rivers converge to form the fabled Amazon River, which then flows nearly 1000 miles until it reaches the Atlantic Ocean at Belem. Tourist brochures gush about the “Meeting of the Waters,” but by now I often have an indifferent attitude toward most tourist attractions. I find people and their stories to be much more interesting than tourist sites, and besides, so far I’ve seen about twenty places that claim to be among the seven wonders of the world. This one, though, surpassed my expectations.

Like oil and water, the Amazon’s two tributaries do not blend or mix upon meeting, but create instead a seam of sorts. They appear from the air to be side-by-side runners of black and caramel carpet. From my plane, I could see tour boats sitting astride the seam, with passengers on one side of the boat looking down at the placid Rio Negro, and people on the other side watching the caramel commotion of Rio Solimoes.

The southern tributary, Rio Negro (“black water”), is the largest black water river in the world. It is tannic—the color of very dark tea or even wine—because upstream it cuts through forests of leaf-shedding trees. Rio Negro’s water is dense and heavy, virtually free of mineral content and home to sparse fish life because it is so acidic. Though dark, it is also crystal clear.
The northern tributary, Rio Solimoes (“white water”), is caramel-colored and wavy, full of churning vegetation and silt from mountains in western South America. It has plentiful fish life. Faster-moving than Rio Negro, Rio Solimoes swirls, churns, and rushes toward the Atlantic.

At the Meeting of the Waters, not only is the seam dramatically visible from above, but it is also three-dimensional—almost as if an underwater wall or baffle rises from the riverbed to the surface of the water. A Brazilian missionary friend described diving into the river and swimming underwater from one stream into the other. Closing her eyes, she exhilarated in bursting through the underwater wall into the other stream.

For ten miles as the newly formed Amazon courses east, the two rivers run completely distinct and separate in their shared channel. The seam visibly exists for that whole distance until, finally, the waters blend.

Looking down on the river and jungles, I listened to my pilot’s fascinating running commentary and found myself thinking about his life in the heart of the Amazon…and about hundreds of thousands of Christians like him serving around the world. The Meeting of the Waters, I realized, was a perfect metaphor for my previous night’s realization about the global Church at a crossroads.

Like one of those tour boats, the global Church today sits at the confluence of two powerful streams. One is the past era, when the Christian church around the world relied upon dedicated Christians from North America or Europe. Those foreigners stayed for extended periods of years, at great expense; emphasizing personal piety, they were strong in the Bible, missions, and service. Mission Marm and her colleagues dedicated themselves to specific people groups or countries or regions, and developed expertise there. They were focused on personal lives and spiritual things, and not on the world or global affairs.

The other stream represents the globalizing world with its changes that are spreading immediately and indiscriminately. That stream is evolving and unpredictable, and it cannot be ignored or dammed. It is characterized by almost entirely different conditions than those the church faced in eras past: different forms of transportation, speed, communication, entertainment, political forces, national and ethnic identities, culture, conflicts, crises, economies, and technologies. Most significantly, the new stream brings a completely scrambled roster of “players” and issues. People from all around the world are involved, with newfound voices of credibility and urgency. As a result, the future Church will need to find its voice in a wider-than-ever range of issues, like poverty, human rights, ecology, justice, conflict, equality, reconciliation, and global events.

Amid all these changes, I am reminded of the warning of former General Electric chairman Jack Welch: if the change inside a company is slower than the change outside the company, then the end of the company is in sight. As a Christian, I take heart that the gospel story is blessedly different from the corporate world. God’s Word will assuredly survive and His truth prevail in the end. That much is guaranteed. My concern, though, is not about eternity. It is about today
and tomorrow: how Christians can be faithful and relevant in this day, as we seek to spread good news to people of different cultures in a winsome way.

Christians, I believe, have always struggled with whether to embrace or reject the world, but separatism is no longer an option. The admonition of British scholar John Stott rings truer now than ever. Dr. Stott charged world-concerned Christians with engaging in “double-listening,” paying attention “both to the ancient Word and to the modern world, in order to relate the one to the other with a combination of fidelity and sensitivity.”

Leaders around the world—whether in developed or developing nations, secular or Christian—recognize the need to understand the changing world, in order to remain viable in their own fields. Author Thomas Friedman writes, “In a world where we are all so much more interconnected, the ability to read the connections, and to connect the dots, is the real value added… If you don’t see the connections, you won’t see the world.”

I believe that the distinctions between how churches thrive and how the world does business are blurring. Christians seeking to understand the church’s role in the future must be effective double-listeners, like Stott, while connecting the dots, like Friedman.

Mission Marm is ill suited for dot-connecting. Decades ago, she left the world as she knew it and focused on a new culture. She dedicated herself to meeting the immediate needs of day-to-day people. I thank God for her. The day she boarded the ship, Mission Marm laid any hopes for keeping up—with friends, with news, with the world—on the altar. She went “back in time” then, and our brief meeting convinced me that she would never catch up again.

Apple Guy, on the other hand, hardly appears ready to take over the helm of the global Church. He will have difficulty double-listening, though he excels in double-tasking. Flexible and capable of adapting, he likely lags in teaching skills, counseling, mission history, international experience… and, ultimately perhaps, his commitment.

So, on one side of the Meeting of the Waters is a familiar stream that allows the global Church to be safe but stodgy. On the other side is a stream whose wild currents will move the Church towards future relevance … and also risk and change. At this new and confusing juncture, church leaders must be forward thinking and bold in forging ahead, despite certain discomfort.

Just like the Meeting of the Waters, the global Church’s distinct streams are bound to merge in the coming years. In that newly globalized world, the longstanding methods and messages of Mission Marm and her generation will show their age. At some point, even the current approaches of Apple Guy will falter, for that future age will generate new needs and responses of its own.

Between the extremes of Mission Marm and Apple Guy is where most Christian workers reside: they seek to be relevant and orthodox, productive and faithful, current and grounded, innovative and contented… and often they just feel overwhelmed. Many followers of Christ who identify more with Missions Marm sense that the global Church needs to change, and many Christian
workers who relate to Apple Guy have the nagging sense that they are not fit to carry Mission Marm’s bags.

The Church, as it strives to reach future generations, will need to bundle Mission Marm’s passion for evangelizing unreached people groups, Apple Guy’s project-management skills, and countless other approaches that emerge for future societal changes.

*The Meeting of the Waters* provides the global Church with—not a one-size-fits-all map detailing the river’s course—but a flexible and varied tool for continually recognizing and adjusting to the all-bets-are-off global environment. It is a tool, too, that must be widely used and shared.

The Christian Church of the future must involve a wide array of globally minded Christians, especially younger believers who are comfortable with change. Including younger believers in service and even leadership will serve several purposes: it will expand younger believers’ vision for the world; enlist their support through prayer, volunteering and giving; and, finally, earn their confidence in a Church which so many of them have deemed irrelevant.

Tradition-minded church leaders accustomed to listening to the Word may be daunted by global realities they have not yet learned to read. At the same time, leaders doing ministry at the very cusp of the cutting edge may need to work harder at incorporating the Word into the world they understand so well. In reality, the impending confluence of waters is unavoidable, and staying the course without responding to change will steer the global Church straight into a turbulent future. The greatest danger is that the valuable treasure carried by the Church—the best news the world can ever hear—will be risked because of leaders lacking the stomach or the mind or the heart to engage the changing times.

The ancient prophet Isaiah spoke to just this kind of challenge, when he said,

> Thus says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick: Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?

I had lunch one day with Timothy Shah, a scholar of Christian movements around the world. At every turn, he was quite positive about the present and future of the global Church. Leaders like Tim, who have traveled, read, and practiced so widely, have profound insights into Christianity today. There are countless Christians like Tim around the world—in pews, house churches, think tanks, universities, and living rooms—who will step up to provide leadership at the Meeting of the Waters. I share Tim’s optimism.

So many of us around the world are praying and hoping for the Christian church to be relevant, loving, and winsome. All of us—church attendees, lapsed members, lay leaders, pastors, teachers, seminarians, and missionaries like Mission Marm and Apple Guy—will participate in the global Church’s next era, in one way or another. Our current world, like Isaiah’s world, has changed, and so must we. For God’s sake, we should take note of the new things that are
happening all around us. The world needs Christians to be at our best. I offer *The Meeting of the Waters* as a guide to make the journey fruitful, faithful, and fun.
CHAPTER 1

Navigating Uncharted Waters

The 7 Global Currents
“The expectations are unreasonable! I am but one small pastor in a tiny church in Africa, but the challenges are getting greater and greater!” the Kenyan pastor vented during a tea break at a leadership conference in East Africa.

As a pastor’s kid, I thought I recognized those insecurities and doubts. They had been my father’s constant carp. Today, friends of mine who are pastors admit to being plagued by the very same doubts.

“You see,” he continued, “what has happened is that quite a few of my parishioners have told me that they prefer the sermons of the televangelist whom they watch on TV before church every Sunday. Perhaps you have heard of the fellow, he’s an American… he’s called T.D. Jakes?”

“Oh my,” I said. Of course, I knew of Jakes, who graced the cover of TIME magazine in 2001 above the title, “Is This Man the Next Billy Graham?” Jakes is a Dallas-based, African-American pastor who draws 30,000 worshipers to his church, has written several best-seller books, is pastor to Dallas Cowboys and other celebrities, and runs anti-poverty programs in both Dallas and Kenya. He preached at a private church service for President-elect Obama on the morning of his Inauguration, and has prayed with President Obama on numerous phone calls.

Despite his lack of formal training, a library, an assistant, or compensation, the Kenyan pastor worked harder and harder to deliver sermons that were biblically truthful and culturally relevant. Now, though, he finds himself in a classic twenty-first century bind. Although he is a Kenyan ministering to Kenyans in Kenya, he has been unwittingly thrust into a global, cross-cultural dilemma. He has not gone to another country as a missionary. Rather, another country (America, in this case) has come into his church—and it will never be the same. America is not the problem: his parishioners could just as easily tune in to televised preachers from South Korea, Australia, or Germany.

The challenge facing the pastor is that global media is seamlessly and invisibly infiltrating his Kenyan culture. Further, I believe that this “cultural creep” is not the exception, but rather he rule in most countries around the world. 10

Increasingly in my work, I grew curious to know just which trends were on the loose, in what countries, and what changes they were causing. The answers were important to me as a foundation executive, as I directed grants around the world, but something much bigger was also at stake: whether the global Church could unlearn old irrelevancies and learn new realities, as it steered into the next era.

I read where a mission scholar wrote, “If you really want to understand the future of Christianity, go and see what is happening in Asia, Africa, and Latin America… That’s where the action is.”11 So, my colleagues and I decided to do just that. From July 2006 through June 2007, we conducted one hundred and fifty eight one-hour interviews with church leaders in eighteen countries. We called it the Global Church Listening Tour.

We interviewed indigenous seminarians, pastors, missionaries, and laypeople. We met them in churches, offices, schools, restaurants, tea shops, hotel rooms, trains, planes, cars, and boats throughout Asia, Africa, and Latin America. We asked all interviewees the following fifteen
questions and transcribed their answers—about the state of the indigenous church in their country; the impact and effectiveness of western missionaries and aid workers in their country; and, the ways in which globalization is affecting local ministry in their country.

With which denomination or church are you most closely affiliated?

What is the state of the church in your country?

What are your dreams for the church in your country?

Which of the following are appropriate ways for the western church to support the church in your country: short-term missions? Money? Evangelism? Church planting? Leadership development? Humanitarian aid?

Which country has sent the most missionaries to your country?

As an American, I am curious to know what you think are the best and worst personal characteristics of American missionaries.

How are younger Christians different than their parents, and do they practice their faith differently?

Are there ministry approaches that are no longer as effective as they used to be, because of changing times?

In conducting the Global Church Listening Tour, my colleagues and I consistently met with a telling response—surprise that Americans would travel to poorer countries, ask questions, and listen. An American foundation with large amounts of money seeking the insights of indigenous church leaders in the developing world produced, at first caused suspicion but ultimately profound encouragement.

Deeply appreciative to be asked, the survey participants were remarkably forthcoming and thoughtful. I felt honored as they shared with me their indigenous perspectives, reminding me of long-simmering issues and also opening my eyes to new on-the-ground realities.

As the Listening Tour data came in, seven prevalent trends began to emerge. These 7 Global Currents flow invisibly and powerfully under and around the global Church in all parts of the globe. As identified in the Listening Tour, they are:

- **Mercy**
  Social justice has become a global imperative, especially among youth and young adults. For Christians, this will lead to an increasing emphasis on meeting physical needs, rather than the previous overwhelming focus on evangelism.
• **Mutuality**  
Leaders from traditionally poor countries have begun to bring education, access, technology, and growing economies …and they will demand to be heard. Future global Church leaders will need to take care to account for these new perspectives and voices.

• **Migration**  
Relocation between nations is on the rise and will be rampant—especially to cities—whether for jobs, war, schooling, tourism, or politics. All future Christian outreaches will need to adapt their message for radically diverse audiences.

• **Monoculture**  
The cultures of all countries will become more and more similar, thanks to worldwide images, ideals, celebrities, and ad campaigns. Christians seeking to communicate with global neighbors will need to be aware that many of their deepest values are now shaped by marketing from outside their borders.

• **Marginalization**  
While there is much talk of the world’s flattening, partisan rifts are actually proliferating. Splinter groups now have more communication avenues for fomenting discord and attracting sympathizers than ever, and the global Church must find a reconciling role amid increasing polarization of all kinds.

• **Machines**  
Cell phones, GPS, and internet are transforming lifestyles worldwide. The future global Church must recognize how newfound abilities to communicate, travel, and consume are changing individuals’ lives and values, too.

• **Memory**  
Even as globalization reshapes the world, every nation and region will have distinct histories that profoundly shaped their society. Visitors must understand how yesterday affects today, in ways especially undermining because they are invisible and unstated.

The Currents do not respect national or ethnic boundaries. Their invisibility makes them doubly dangerous, because they are relentless and dominant… but often overlooked. These Currents will profoundly alter the global Church’s future direction—for good or evil—depending on how quickly and wisely the Church reacts.

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My job as executive director of a private foundation afforded me an enviable string of private tutoring sessions from great leaders in the Global Church, as they visited my office day in and day out. One day I met with a publisher from Moscow, the next a politician from Sierra Leone, and then a substance abuse counselor from Mexico, a summer camp director from Romania, a seminary president from Egypt, a researcher from China, and a church planter from Ghana. And I have also met American ministry greats, too: the urban ministry leader from Pasadena, the
megachurch pastor from Manhattan, the substance abuse counselor from Richmond, and the missions expert from Berkeley. It has all been part of the job.

Those tutors of mine came from more than one hundred nations, and not just the powerful ones. Those men and women had no doubts that their societies were modernizing and changing, rendering old stereotypes counterproductive. They did not characterize any single Global Current as totally negative or positive, but recognized that each of them could be harnessed for good as well as for evil. The Currents are reliable tools for those who would help lead the global Church into a bold and relevant future—to skate where the puck is going to be.

I have been asked why today’s followers of Christ—in Delhi or Sydney or Richmond, Virginia—should care about the 7 Global Currents. The answer is that the Currents will help people to reconcile their faith with their world—to connect Sundays with the rest of the week and provide a perspective on religion’s centrality in the world today. The Church’s mission is to represent Jesus Christ to the people of the world, and I believe that the Currents will help the Church understand what those people are like and how they are changing.

The practice of watching the changing world and constantly adjusting current approaches accordingly is second-nature in so many fields, but not in the worldwide Christian Church. Mission practitioners and scholars have traditionally focused on specific people, cultures, or countries. That was a noble undertaking, as missionaries engaged with distant, remote locations that had seen few outsiders and for which there may have been little or no written record.

But global Church leaders today can no longer just be specialists; they must also now be generalists. In an age when trends spread “virally,” significant events in the military, academic, media, economic, marketing, and financial worlds have profound impact on the global Church’s efforts. One global Church scholar notes that “there used to be a global community of binary culture brokers: people who understood American culture and Singaporean culture from extensive, direct experience. Now there is an expanding global community of global culture brokers: people who understand many cultures from extensive, direct experience.” In the future, global Church experts and practitioners must master the 7 Global Currents, and not just specific cultures, church history, theology, and the Bible, in order to navigate in an all-bets-are-off world.

Just what do I mean by an “all-bets-are-off world?” Even in the most provincial or remote venue, global forces are now at play. Nothing seems to remain the same from year to year, or week to week. Change is the norm. Once again, rivers provide a helpful metaphor. In a classic passage, Mark Twain describes the harrowing task of piloting riverboats on the Mississippi River over the course of days, seasons, and years when seemingly nothing remains the same. As I reflected on the challenge of adjusting to changing mission environments in the globalizing world, I thought back to Twain’s wonderful description:

One cannot easily realize what a tremendous thing it is to know every detail of twelve hundred miles of river and know it with absolute exactness. If you will take the longest street in New York, and travel up and down it, conning its features patiently until you know every house and window and lamppost and big and little sign by heart… And then, if you will go on until you know every street–crossing, the character, size, and position of
the crossing-stones, … Next, if you will take half of the signs in that long street, and change their places once a month, and still manage to know their new positions accurately on dark nights, and keep up with these repeated changes without making any mistakes, you will understand what is required of a pilot’s peerless memory by the fickle Mississippi.¹⁴

That is the kind of environment in which the Christian church finds itself today, as it seeks to engage society. Global trends and tools are being unleashed in one part of the globe, and immediately transforming local environments half a world away—from Dallas to Nairobi and back again. As unfair or difficult as it may be, my Kenyan friend must now consider and harness the influence of television broadcasting and other forms of media from countries all around the world. No longer may he merely remove himself to a quiet place, immerse himself in the Bible, and emerge with a word for his flock. Now, he must also take into account what is happening around the world—including T.D. Jakes’ latest sermon playing every Sunday before church. And Jakes, too, as his parishioners grow more eager to serve the needs of others around the globe, must stay tuned to the cries of people as far away from as Kenya and Kampala.

Thomas Friedman writes that “today, more than ever, the traditional boundaries between politics, culture, technology, finance, national security and ecology are disappearing. You often cannot explain one without referring to the others, and you cannot explain the whole without reference to them all.”¹⁵ The same applies, of course, to the global Church, and the 7 Global Currents are a tool for doing just that.

I do have great news: the task is an interesting one—quite fun, actually. The happy result will be that the global Church’s efforts will built upon a current, relevant, and indigenous basis. For Christians seeking to be faithful and relevant in the changing world, the 7 Currents offer new ways to pray, think, give, send and go. Most strategically, the Currents provide a starter kit for a new generation of globally minded Christians who want to see God’s kingdom come: in brothels and barrios, in statehouses and criminal courts, in movie theatres and boardrooms, and in rain forests and greenbelts.