



Episode 055: What's the Role of the North American Church in Global Mission?

Dr. Paul Borthwick, together with his wife Christie, serves on the staff of [Development Associates International](#) and focuses on leadership development in the Majority World.

Today, we've asked Paul to unpack with us one of his more recent publications, [Western Christians in Global Mission: What's the Role of the North American Church?](#)

Paul is also the author of [A Mind for Missions](#).

Would you take just a minute, please, and tell us a bit about yourself and how you came to be passionate about God's mission?

- I was born into a Christian family, and we had missionaries visit our house when I was a young kid.
- The biblical teaching on the Great Commission, combined with facts learned about the world through things like Perspectives has provided an objective foundation.
- Short-term missions and relationships with global Christians has really made me want to be part of what God's doing in the world.

For the last several hundred years, or at least couple hundred years, the North American church has been one of the principle senders and supporters of missionaries. Talk with us a little bit about how that trend is changing these days.

- Somewhere in the 1980s, I was told that statisticians came to the realization that the global church was now more than 50% in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The church around the world was getting the realization that the Great commission was for them.
- We are living in an age where, from a North American perspective, we now have a much wider team that we're part of. So it's from every nation to every nation.
- The Western world is also now a huge recipient of missionaries. So we're no longer just a sender, but also a receiver, through both international students as well as immigrants and refugees.
- I love to tell people that outside of the time that Jesus walked the earth, this is the most exciting time to be alive in Christian history.



Do you think that we as a church in North America are understanding this trend?

- It depends a lot on the church, on the pastor, on the leadership. I think many times when I go to visit or speak at churches, their mission vision seems to be somewhere stuck in the 1980s or 90s. It's still a "from us to them" mentality.
- A lot of the history of missions has been from "wealthier, more powerful" nations, to "less powerful, less wealthy" nations. Now, we see some of this inverted. So countries that are considered "developing", or non-Western countries that are not as wealthy, are sending missionaries to Europe and North America. It's just a grand shift of God at work.

How should the North American church continue to participate in this? What are some of the strengths that we can still bring as the North American church? What can we contribute?

- When I was doing the research for this book you're referring to, [Western Christians in Global Mission: What's the Role of the North American Church?](#), I asked global leaders that very question. And then we also evaluate the other way. What's the strengths and weaknesses of the Majority World church? One of the answers that came most frequently, obviously, was generosity. We often have financially more resources. We often have more educational resources.
- The North American church, especially those of us in the United States, bring with us a naïve optimism. Meaning a belief that change is possible. Which actually is sometimes very helpful in countries that are stuck in the past more than anticipating the future.
- We also have some cross-cultural experience, lessons learned as missionaries that can help the new missionary senders. We can help them keep from making the same mistakes we made.

What are some of the concerns or negative elements that we need to be careful of?

- Again, it may apply less or more depending on the churches and the context we're in in North America. But there's a tendency towards oversimplification of the world.
- There can be a misunderstanding of where we all fit together. So sometimes I hear churches sounding like they need to do the whole Great Commission by themselves - and forgetting the fact that we're part of a huge multi-national team. There can be a lack of critical thinking.
- Sometimes churches are being affected by an undercurrent of nationalism and superiority.
- There can be a lack of critical thinking sometimes.
- I think sometimes there can be a posture superiority, which is founded on our consumerism. We think that if we're richer, therefore we must be better. And I think that's a dangerous trend that we need to be very humbly aware of as we enter into global mission.



In your book, you unpack some of the principles you submit will be helpful for North American churches to consider as they partner with the Majority World church. What are some of those principles, Paul?

- The first one is humility. The idea that we have as much to learn as have to teach. The idea that we have to be giving as well as receiving.
- The second principle is reciprocity. It's amazing how many people in North American churches want to go fix global projects or go fix global situations, but we don't realize that the church in that country has something to offer us. There's not a sense of reciprocity.
- The third is a spirit of sacrifice. If we're middle class North Americans, we can be generous without being sacrificial. In other words, we can give away lots of money, but we still have lots left over. One of the things that the global church wants from us is the willingness to walk with them, to be with them, to join them in the slums, to join them in the struggle, and take the risks that actually involves our lives and not just our money.
- The fourth principle is that we need to, again, come back to this whole idea of equality. That it's the whole church taking the whole gospel to the whole world. That means we are alongside of people who are equally called, equally competent, and equally desirous of effectiveness as we might be.
- Last but not least, we need to be listening. With two ears and two eyes and one mouth, try to observe and listen four times for every word you speak. I think sometimes we ask questions and simultaneously put the answer into the mouths of the people we're talking to. As opposed to just sitting and being silent to listen to what they actually have to say.

How do Majority World churches and Majority World leaders generally perceive us from North America?

- It depends. If you find missionaries that are truly there to serve - they love us, they welcome us, they make us their family. If you find people that still feel like they need to lord it over people by having big budgets, then you find people who are, in effect, renting national partners but not necessarily partnering with them. And I think the most significant trait is the capacity for mutuality.
- Pastor Oscar gave a great analogy. He said, "When North Americans think about partnership, they think about transactional partnerships". He said, "Africans, when they think of partnerships, they think in terms of family. If we're family, we're family even if we're not doing anything together. It's just that we have a relationship that will last for our lifetime."

If there are listeners to this podcast that are part of a church that really does want to do a good job, an improving job, of being part of the global mission movement, what do you see as priorities for that church? What advice would you give to them?

- Every church is going to have to realize at some point they can't do everything. So I think it's wise for churches to have some sort of policy or strategy. But I really strongly encourage churches to make their first priority to "missionize the congregation". What I mean by that is to get people excited about God's world. From that point, God can direct people into his strategy.



What advice would you have for a church, as far as practical steps, then?

- Look around yourselves as a church, to the global opportunities in your own neighborhood. The unreached that a generation ago were exotic “over-there” people. Now they're my pharmacist, my medical doctor, my next-door neighbor, my co-worker in the office. Looking for local opportunities to learn how to do global mission.
- Churches are wise to connect to something bigger than themselves. Whether it be mission agencies that have multi-cultural staff, or a group like the [International Fellowship of Evangelical Students](#). Learning who some of the leaders are around the world can help us get connected to some leaders that we might not otherwise know just by virtue of our own churches.

Paul, if any of our listeners would like to follow you or learn more from you, how can they do that?

- www.paulborthwick.com
- [Development Associates International](#)
- [International Fellowship of Evangelical Students](#)
- [Missio Nexus](#)

From the conclusion of your book, just speak to some of the analogies there you've used.

- One of the analogies you'll hear is people saying, "Well, the baton has been passed." I thoroughly disagree with that analogy. In a relay race, when the baton is passed, the person who releases the baton gets out of the race. There is never a time that the North American church is released from involvement in God's Great Commission. We are always going to be in this race.
- I would argue that there are going to be places where we need to be the initiators, and there are other places where we need to take a step back and follow the lead of local leaders, indigenous leaders, in different countries. We're not necessarily at the front of the parade anymore. Are we humble enough to march in that parade even if we're not the ones up front?

