

## Mission to the World

*Summary: For all of Christian history, missionaries have traveled across the world with the goal of extending the church to new peoples and lands. Following the routes of empire and trade, unique Christian traditions arose across the globe. Some served the interests of colonizing powers, while others, influenced by diverse indigenous cultures and identities, opposed imperialism.*

The history of Christian missions is as old as the church, inspired by the commission Christ left his followers to “make disciples of all nations.” In the early 3rd to 7th centuries, Syrian Christians missionized as far as India and China. Meanwhile, early Roman monks planted churches in Ireland and England, Germany, Northern Europe, Eastern Europe, and Russia. The 16th century, which saw both the Protestant Reformation and the Catholic Counter-Reformation, was also the beginning of European colonial expansion and with it, church expansion. The Spanish conquered and colonized lands of South America, Mexico, and the Philippines. The Portuguese planted colonies in Brazil, Africa, India, and China. The British Empire claimed territories in India, Ceylon, Burma, Africa, Australia, and North America. The Dutch controlled colonies along the Atlantic coasts of Africa and the Americas, as well as Indonesia. The French took possession of large portions of inland North America and Africa, as well as Southeast Asia.

The spread of Christianity followed in the tracks of empire, trade, and colonization. Churches and missionaries were often actively involved or complicit in the exploitation and oppression of colonized people, with missions that served to bolster imperial control over colonized peoples. Other missionaries, however, were among the strongest critics of colonial oppressions. Many were the first to seriously study the religious and cultural traditions of the peoples among whom they worked. Especially in Asia, missionaries also challenged exclusivist theologies, for they saw what they understood to be evidence of God’s living presence in non-Christian faiths. And most importantly, many indigenous converts to Christianity adopted their new faith on terms quite different from those put forth by Europeans, using their faith as a tool to preserve their cultures and resist their colonies.

In the wake of the Reformation, Protestants and Catholics competed to win converts and grow their ranks. The order of Jesuits (also known as the Society of Jesus) founded in the 16th century, was influential as a Catholic missionary order, sending priests to such places as Latin America and East Asia.

Later, Protestants formed missionary societies to maintain institutional links between the Protestant churches of Europe, and later the United States, with the new churches established in Asia and Africa.

As colonial empires began to dissolve, mission churches developed strong voices and leadership of their own. Today, much of the dynamism and energy of the Christian churches worldwide comes from the churches of Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The last few decades have seen a renewed emphasis on the authentic expression of the gospel in every culture and language. In the post-colonial era, churches in all parts of the world have moved away from European or American expressions of Christianity, using their own culture, music, and arts to shape their new forms of Christian worship and community.

Today, many of these cultural and ethnic expressions have come to America with new waves of immigration. As with first-generation immigrants in the past, these immigrants have maintained their own congregations—Korean, Samoan, Ethiopian, South Indian, or Chinese—and some view themselves as missionaries to the West. They have brought an astounding new diversity to the face of American Christianity.