

Learning to get along with my two global families

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Anyone who is married will tell you how challenging it can be to get along with the two different extended families of the bride and the groom. While the groom ponders the strange behavior of the bride's relatives, he is likely to be enlightened by the bride about irregularities in his own family! The truth be told, you learn a lot about both families in the process. Although my wife and I have so far successfully navigated this in our own journey together, I've recently been pondering how I've been challenged in a much wider context with my two global families?

I was born into the human race; my first global family. As only one of almost 7 billion individuals, I am increasingly aware of both the joys and the challenges of getting along with this unfathomable mosaic of peoples, languages, ethnicities, religions, and cultures. For over 100 years we have come together every 4 years (only recently alternating in summer and winter) for a family reunion of sorts around our most accomplished athletes. These Olympic Games are generally a time of global solidarity and celebration; soon to be repeated in Vancouver, London, Sochi, and Rio de Janeiro. But other get-togethers are not so pleasant. In recent global meetings we have had grave problems agreeing on trade, global warming, nuclear weapons, and a host of other issues. Consequently, while we seem to have the know-how and resources to live well on our planet, we flounder when trying to work together to save it. Nonetheless, the human family overflows with creativity producing dazzling works of art, poignant films, beautiful music, and stunning works of literature. It's a great chaotic family to belong to and I'm glad to be a part of it.

I was baptized into the Christian church; my second global family. The global Christian family is made up of almost 2.3 billion people (about a third of the human family). This year 45 million babies will be born into our family, 22 million of us will die, 16 million will join us as adult converts, and 12 million will grow tired of us and defect, most to agnosticism. As a result, there will be a net gain of 27 million Christians. That's a lot of new people to become acquainted with!

I've been thinking a lot about this family, having recently completed the Atlas of Global Christianity. The Atlas documents 6 major Christian traditions (Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, Anglican, Independent, Marginal), 300 minor traditions (Lutheran, Methodist, etc.), and 41,000 denominations (for example, well over 100 Presbyterian denominations in South Korea alone). My own journey winds its way through this denominational diversity. I was baptized Lutheran, later joined a Charismatic mission agency (YWAM), married a Presbyterian in a Congregational church, baptized my first daughter in an Anglican church (in Singapore), worked in a Baptist mission headquarters, joined the faculty of an Evangelical seminary, and am now attending an international inter-denominational church in Chiang Mai, Thailand. Who am I other than a follower of Jesus Christ?

In addition, the complexion of my global family is changing (quite literally). It was over 80% White in 1910 but will be over 60% non-White in 2010. Even Lutherans are looking less German and Scandinavian every year! Our Christian family (like the human family) is represented by thousands of ethnic backgrounds and thousands of languages around the world. This positive development brings a new set of challenges. Some advocate the abandoning of all Western forms of Christianity in favor of the dynamic structures of churches of the Global South. Others ponder how to manage the seemingly unorganized and messy spread of Christianity in Africa and Asia. But the truth is that we all belong to Christ and we will have to learn how to interact in ways that strengthen the church in every country.

One thing is for certain; both of these families are global, and they don't always understand each other or agree on how to treat each other. Members of my Christian family are divided over the many

problems that face the whole human family. Some would be glad to leave (a.k.a. ?be raptured?) as soon as possible. Others want to stick around to tackle global problems as an integral part of their Christian faith. What worries me most, however, is how little interaction there is between the two global families. My own research shows that almost 90% of all Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus have never met a Christian. In addition, most Christian missionaries over the past century have engaged only tribal religionists and other Christians. Yet at the heart of the gospel message is the incarnation of Jesus Christ. He came and lived among us so that we could live with grace and humility among our human family. How can we, as his followers, claim to love people we are unwilling to meet?

We can?t be content as Christians if we separate ourselves from either of our global families. I?ve spent the last several months in a Buddhist country and I?m continually amazed at how wonderful it is to be a Christian here. I share communion with Christians from hill tribes in the Golden Triangle. I rent my home from a kind Buddhist professor who is genuinely interested in my research. Every day I interact with people from both global families. It is richly rewarding to love and to be loved by both families.

One advantage of knowing so many people of other religions is that virtually every day is a holiday in someone?s tradition! One day, it?s Eid al-Fitr, the end of the Muslim fast; a month later, Khao Phansa, the beginning of Thai Buddhist lent; and after another month, Zarathosht Diso, commemorating the death of the prophet Zoroaster. Today religious people represent over 80% of the world?s population so it is a significant undertaking both to understand and to interact with people of other religious traditions. Of course, the other 20% are agnostics and atheists who also need to be treated with respect and dignity, regardless of how vitriolic a small number have been in attacking religion. Christians must not answer polemics with polemics!

As Christians we all belong to these two global families. In North America we are increasingly likely to have daily contact with representatives of both families, from far away as well as from nearby. We will continue to send missionaries to work around the world, most strategically among peoples with no Christian witness. Unlike our great-grandparents, we will do mission in concert with a truly global Christian family to reach a global human family. Whether we are from India, Brazil, Nigeria, or the USA, we have to ask ourselves afresh how to participate in our global fellowship, while, at the same time, incarnating the gospel among our human family. How well we imitate Christ in our relationships with both is at the heart of the missionary task in the 21st century.