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## Globalization and the Christian Community

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# Globalization and the Christian Community

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by Duane Bajema

## Globalization

**G**lobalization, internationalization, and cross-cultural are terms that describe changes in our culture and the way we interact with our changing world. This paper not only explores the underpinnings of globalization but also examines its implications for higher education, particularly for Dordt College.

The terms *globalization, internationalization, and cross-cultural* describe a changing and an increasingly rapid process of interaction among people of differing geographical regions and cultures.

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We are interacting more because we travel more, e-mail more, and trade more. People are gaining access to other peoples and cultures at greater speeds than ever before and in ways never before possible. Such access forces people to engage in a changing world as the globalization process picks up momentum.

This increasing prominence of globalization has come about largely through the changing infrastructures of communication and transportation. For better or worse, we have surrounded the planet with an electronic system of information that links cultures. Satellite communication has made information about world events available to almost all parts of the world, and a general-information transfer in such areas as markets, weather information, and finance can happen in a matter of seconds. The internet has linked the world, making ideas and information accessible and rapidly exchangeable. Air travel has fostered an increased flow of people, animals, plants, and materials to most areas of the world in larger numbers and with greater speed than ever before.

A subsequently developing argument is that the world is becoming more of a uniform place. That argument evokes considerable debate regarding the wisdom of globalization and its impetus towards uniformity, for uniformity ultimately discourages diversity.

Schools of higher education have reacted to globalization in various ways. Global issues are imbedded in courses of agriculture, history, political science, art, and virtually every other program on campuses. Awareness of globalization has increased on campuses through programs and op-

portunities that promote international travel as part of a degree. International-faculty sabbaticals, international internships, and study-abroad programs are much more prevalent and accessible now than they were a generation ago for an increasing number of institutions. Thus, out of a desire to prepare students for a global society, educational institutions have developed more international experiences in their curricula.

### **Is Globalization new?**

Stating that globalization is happening seems to be as obvious as stating that fire is hot. However the causes and effects of globalization deserve additional thought if we are to assess and plan future change.

The immigration of people and the transfer of goods, services, and ideas are not new. Scholars will point to the sixteenth century and describe how Europe developed trade connections that spread and promoted a European culture to all areas of the globe. The trade connections not only affected the ways people interacted with each other but also forged modifications in each of the cultures contacted.

The nineteenth century witnessed an immense migration from Europe. When North and South America were colonized by the Europeans, European countries began trading with the American colonies. Many immigrants took their culture with them, but eventually new American or Canadian cultures evolved as the cultural differences slowly diminished.

As the late twentieth century witnessed the end of the Cold War along with the weakening of barriers between the former Soviet Union/China and the West, transportation and communication improved in all parts of the world. Transportation continued to expand as accessibility, safety, and affordability made travel over large distances possible for an ever larger number of people of differing economic strata. Satellite communication, internet availability, and the exchange of information have made the process of globalization much more rapid as the impediments to interaction caused by physical distance have decreased.

The changes from the nineteenth century to the present are largely factors of speed and accessi-

bility. As the exchange of knowledge, ideas, goods, and services takes place at a much faster rate, the world's cultures must adapt to those changes more quickly. When cultures are forced to adapt to change, they find it difficult to maintain a sense of individuality, local control, and cultural identity. Forced change has sparked fears and spawned debates over the loss of cultural diversity and the victimization of the poor and powerless by the power-holders.

### **Pillars of globalization**

Globalization, broadly defined as a process of becoming one global culture through interaction among countries and cultures, is currently being accelerated and supported by a vast array of communication and travel technologies. This increased interaction among cultures, which has increased interchange and activity on a global scale, has fostered a growing interdependence of people throughout the world.

Globalization is frequently discussed in terms of trade, imports and exports, and economic development. However, globalization is a more complex process. Globalization is not a natural phenomenon like an approaching weather front (Küng 127). While globalization is affected by natural laws, it is a process that ultimately relies on human actions. Since it relies on human actions, world integration is tainted with sin and the depravity of the human condition. (Dr. Roelof A. Jongeneel describes human integration in the context of economic policy and describes globalization in more detail as a human process rather than a process based on natural laws.) As a result of this taint, one must study the different elements that contribute to the development of globalization in order to understand globalization itself.

Globalization can be visualized as being undergirded by certain agents or pillars. The concept of pillars implies factors that together support something; the concept also implies the idea that the removal of the supporting factors jeopardizes the thing being supported. Metaphorically, the pillar-image clearly suggests the complexity of globalization. Each pillar supports globalization in a distinct manner. The examination of one pillar without the consideration of the other pillars does

not give a coherent picture of the complexity of the contributing forces, as each pillar has distinctive qualities. The distinctive qualities of each pillar can be debated and amplified, but the pillars should also be understood both individually and collectively as a foundation as they contribute to the globalization process.

The pillars possess a complexity that not only can be described in positive terms but also can be understood by its negative consequences. The fact that either quality can be emphasized indicates the complexity in the implications of globalization.

*Pillar #1 Faster Information Exchange*

The ease, speed, and accessibility of exchange are rapidly developing one pillar in the globalization process. The factor that makes the current process of globalization noteworthy, especially when it

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is compared to that of the fifteenth through the twentieth centuries, is an acceleration supported by a vast network of communication and transportation technologies. The process of interchange, which was previously discussed in terms of months and weeks, is, with increasing frequency, discussed in terms of days, hours, and—in a case such as finance—minutes and seconds.

Proponents of globalization point to the speed and amount of information that can be transferred, arguing not only that globalization makes the world more accessible but also that the possibility of a new-found synergy in the information transfer will spawn new efficiencies to help resolve global problems of climate, species extinction, and resource usage. For example, as climate change is monitored and analyzed and as information about the climate change is distributed throughout the world, the world can become aware of problems and potential solutions in a faster, more efficient manner. As the movement of information makes for a more informed populace, a more informed populace can make better decisions. Similarly, the various causes of species extinction can be identified and quickly communicated to a broader audience for the quicker development of solutions.

Resource usage also responds dramatically to the increased availability of information. For example, as information about a developing drought in Brazil or China is communicated, individuals with an interest in such events will respond efficiently and predictably. As a drought will cause a decline in total world grain production, the information about the impending drought will be used by people who have a vested economic interest in the grain, including transporters, processors, wholesalers, and retailers. This information will cause prices to increase because individuals with a vested interest in buying grain will react predictably; world grain prices will then rise in reaction to the reduced grain availability. As the price increases because of the reduced supply, consumption will decline. The system of supply and demand will function more efficiently because the information was widely available and easily accessed. Ultimately, as more information is made available to more people, resource usage will stabilize predictably and world stability will increase. When people receive information as an event unfolds instead of being caught without warning in an event's sudden appearance, they can respond in a more stable manner.

The markets will be more just and fair because the information will not be limited to a select few who have access to travel and information. The select few, rich, and powerful, who would manipulate

the market, give way to the many, who now have access to the same information through travel and access to more information on a global network.

Nevertheless, the ease, speed, and accessibility of globalization have a downside: the world becomes more vulnerable to short-term mistakes and undesirable consequences of human activity. As the speed of transfer has unleashed modern and post-modern influences quickly and globally, some writers have labeled the activity as “hyper modernity” (Samuel 4). Modernity, very much a product of reason, criticizes and replaces the authority of religion with that of reason. Globalization has speeded up that replacement, resulting in “hyper modernity.”

The forces that regulate the world, cause globalization, and shape its effect on our daily lives, families, jobs, systems of justice, systems of living with one another, and future are changing. Vinay Samuel, the Executive Director of the Oxford Centre of Mission Studies, describes one effect of globalization’s speed:

Up to the 1970s the regulating forces were governments and the political system. But these began to weaken dramatically in the 1980s. Since 1989 everywhere the state is weak and powerless. Political power has fallen into disgrace. Politicians are held in dis-respect. When President Yeltsin and Clinton met in Moscow at the beginning of September they were the two most vulnerable presidents in the world. They are not strong. Their countries may be super powers but these two individuals are not. (Samuel 4)

While the speed of the globalization process has taken the power away from an individual country’s social and political structures, it has strengthened the power and influence of international economic structures and information-delivery structures in new ways.

As the power of information-delivery structures strengthens, the world becomes more vulnerable to short-term mistakes and undesirable consequences of human activity. For example, globalization has increasingly become a threat to cultural diversity. The pillar of speed and access in the globalization process is a new experience in world history. Damage to national and global stability can hap-

pen quickly and extensively, especially when the political and social structures lose their power and influence. The separation and differences of geographic areas and cultures that formerly provided resilience to international problems are being replaced by uniformity. Subsequently, a problem at one point in the world reverberates with greater effect and consequence as the softening cushions of separation and diversity diminish. At a result, the world actually becomes more vulnerable rather than more stable.

#### *Pillar #2 Economic Expedience*

A second dominant pillar undergirding globalization is the force of economic expedience. Much of the optimism surrounding globalization focuses on how globalization will cause progress, improve efficiencies, and generate wealth. Even the most underdeveloped and the poorest peoples will have access to knowledge and information and will experience an increasingly higher standard of living. More people will have enough food and access to medicine, medical treatment, and education.

Cooperation will become more of a reality. Goudzwaard, in his book *Globalization and the Kingdom of God*, argues that globalization will enable a growing number of civil movements to impact human rights positively and protect the environment. As cooperation results from and helps shape the development of globalization, it will hold in check some of the negative aspects of competition found in capitalism. The pillar of economic expedience will have more potential to be shaped with justice and fairness as more people are cooperatively included in the shaping of international order. The pillar of faster information exchange will thus contribute to the pillar of economic expedience.

International cooperation will promote the development of a structure where trade will improve the well-being of more and more people on the planet. Trade by its very nature carries the ideology of competition, individualism, and the efficiencies promoted by the survival-of-the-fittest mentality, as well as post-modern thought. Under such an ideology, the moral positions of right and wrong are defined by what seems to be good for the individual’s best interest instead of by the es-

establishment of normative truths. Justice becomes pluralistic to meet the needs and wishes of the parties involved.

The development of a pluralistic justice carries the danger of developing a justice system based on who holds the most influential power. At the heart of globalization is access, people's having access to each other and to the resources on the planet. Access is often clouded with the pursuit of economic gain, which has long been the driving and powerful force of globalization. Globalization is often defined in terms of economic growth, efficiency in the pursuit of economic up-scaling, and the American Dream of individual wealth and prosperity. The pursuit of economic gain may be advantageous to one participant and disadvantageous to the others, depending on the rules that guide the process and who has what position of power in the process of interaction and exchange. The force of economic expedience must be acknowledged as a major pillar in the globalization process as discussions continue about the ways that individuals, groups, and countries should and will adapt to the global economy.

As the economic and commercial culture reaches into the remotest regions of the world, global information sells all sorts of products and ideologies that promote consumption, glamorous lifestyles, and ways of achieving the good life of owning things. As the first pillar—speed and access—has facilitated the growth, power, and influence of the economic and commercial sectors of the world, it has enabled the social and political influence of these sectors to dominate local social and political influences. Subsequently, multinational companies, which possess substantial economic power, influence, and the ability to function outside the checks and balances of political and social processes that once existed because of historical physical boundaries and borders, affect world cultures. Here is an example from a few years ago:

The European Union, which consists of 15 member states, is currently the largest economic block in the world. At the last bi-annual meeting of the Union in Helsinki in December 1999, one agenda item was the issue [of] how to pay for the countries' social welfare programs. Due to self-imposed deficit restrictions, the money

had to be raised through revenues of some sort. It was proposed that a capital gains tax be placed on European citizens who were investing in the London Stock Exchange. The British authorities refused to do so, explaining that such a tax would result in capital fleeing from London to the other markets. And so, a standoff arose between Great Britain and the rest of the European Union members that is still unresolved. What this makes evident is that even the largest economic block in the world is no longer capable of taxing its wealthiest citizens – the ones who can afford to speculate in the financial market. For this reason, we are seeing a diminishment worldwide of allocations to healthcare, education, pensions, and other public welfare assistance. It seems no country can tame this unregulated monster which is speculative capital. (Puledda 2)

### *Pillar #3 Peace and Stability*

The third pillar of globalization is based on the belief that world peace and stability will be achieved through economic and political inter-

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dependence. Proponents of globalization believe that the lessening of diversity and isolation and the increasing interdependence lessens the potential for wars and conflict. They assume that rapid communication will lessen misunderstandings and facilitate conflict resolution, that interdependence will lessen the incentives to engage in conflict, and that advantages to all parties will stimulate the settling of differences that would lead to conflict and war. They assume that the process of globalization

promotes the growing economic interdependence of countries and cultures around the world through the increasing volume and variety of trade, the flow of international capital, the establishment of fair trading rules, and the more rapid and widespread use of technology that enhances trade. They believe that as increasing economic interdependence softens the threat of conflict through economic expedience and necessity, peace and stability will result.

However, one could argue that as economic linkages increasingly occur between global institutions, the promotion of peace and stability is dubious at best since it masks the truth about globalization: that it is the work of one culture dominating another culture. Domination is possible as one culture holds the power and ability to influence and control information, influence the exchange of goods and information, and promote the development of rules in the name of self-interest. As globalization allows the powerful to dominate the less powerful, the process becomes one of at least cultural colonization if not resource colonization. Peace will not be attained through communal interaction. If peace does occur, it will result from the control of the less powerful by those who possess more power. The belief in peace through communal interaction—globalization—denies the depravity of the human condition and assumes the possibility of an unattainable human utopia.

#### *Pillar #4: Uniformity*

A fourth pillar is the movement towards a global uniformity that facilitates exchange. A uniform language and uniform exchange increase efficiency. The U.S. dollar has become the major currency used in international trade as individuals and companies within countries carry on economic activity. The uniformity of language, currency of exchange, and rules of conduct increases activity efficiency since it causes economic costs to go down and allows for less human energy and less environmental resources to carry out an exchange.

In essence, uniformity is a driving force to make the world a melting pot where integrating cultures and economies becomes normative. Most cultures fear the loss of not only their identity but also the control of their destiny to outside global-

izing forces. They value local knowledge and wisdom that bind families and communities together. Global access and resources do not always help local needs and frequently destroy local unique qualities that have made an area special in the world. For example, the introduction of an international supermarket into a community introduces new products and new ways of doing things that change the balance of local and international influence. Local self-governance and community development are being pressured by the forces of globalization that promote international development and an international culture.

#### **The Impact of Globalization on Public Universities**

Globalization has prompted colleges and universities to modify their curricula to prepare students for interaction with other cultures. The National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges has produced and adopted a Task Force Report from the Globalizing Agricultural Science and Education for America (GASEPA) group, which provides direction and leadership in defining globalization at its member institutions. The number-one recommendation was to “Enhance global competitiveness of U.S. agriculture through human resource development”; the second was to “Develop and disseminate information about market, trade, and business opportunities” that will enable “farmers and agribusinesses to more effectively compete in the global economy” (GASEPA 1). It is clear that competition and economic trade have shaped and guided the development of international programs at universities.

While the wording concerning competition may evoke agreement or disagreement, the recommendations for competition should not come as a surprise. State universities have long promoted competition in the education of students for national and international tasks. Universities have long promoted exports, increased market share for farmers in their state, and helped improve trade advantages whenever possible. After all, universities are funded by taxpayers within a state, and the universities are sensitive to the economic needs of the state.

Cooperation and research funding are often

associated with commodity groups who have an economic influence in the state, such as the corn and soybean growers, pork producers, and beef producers.

Study tours have frequently been supported by multinational companies. For example, the Cargill Company has generously supported student and faculty study and travel in other countries such as China and Russia. As students develop an international understanding of a country and its trade potential, they become very employable to the

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multinational companies that are bidding to promote the economic interests of the company. The agenda of these companies and corporations is quite clear and openly accepted as a positive activity for the students and the university, especially as public tax-dollar support is limited. The agendas of corporations influence the educational process along the lines of economic expedience and development. Corporate support brings with it the values, influences, and philosophies that compound the complexities of dealing with the issues and implications of globalization. Asking questions about justice or developing an assessment of activities on the culture is difficult when the agenda is to promote profitability and competitive advantage.

### **The Impact of Globalization on Christian Colleges**

Tom Sine contends that the number one force that will shape the future of our lives, families, con-

gregations, and the larger world is globalization. Sine quotes someone as having written, "For better or worse we have girded our planet in a global electronic nervous system of satellites and fax machines from which there is no exit"; he responds by saying, "it is through that global electronic system that we have witnessed the creation of new one-world economic order (47). Whether we agree or disagree with Sine and others like him, the developments ascribed to globalization have affected and continue to affect the minds and thinking of the Christian community.

I want to argue that the process of globalization is being affected, directed, and dominated by multinational companies and banks that have developed their own system of cultures and behaviors. Puledda asserts that the culture being globalized by the values and behaviors of the companies is "being reproduced through schools and media, gurus and prophets, who explain to us every day that the only true value is money: money is sought, multiplied, worshiped; money is the only God that justifies everything (Puledda 2). The espoused virtues and principles of democracy, equality, and opportunity only mask the real motive: seeking economic gain within whatever situations can be created to ensure that gain. One could argue, from the assertions in the GASEPA document, that universities today are heavily influenced by the values and behaviors of the multinational corporations.

What can a Christian vision offer as a counter to the behavior and values of multinational companies and banks? Sine states that the "number one crisis in both society and church today is the crisis of vision" (145). This lack of vision stems from a lack of reflection, analysis, and wrestling with the culture—a lack that promotes mindlessness (Wood 4). Sine's assertion that we have been "derailed by modernity" compels us to reflect on modernity's implications (Sine 154). Earlier it was stated that the primary recommendation for public universities was to "Enhance global competitiveness of U.S. agriculture through human resource development (GASEPA 1). Christian universities might state their primary goal in a similar manner, except for the words "competitiveness of U.S. agriculture." The goal for the Christian college might be to "Enhance globalization through Christian



human resource development.”

While secular universities clearly state their purpose regarding globalization, the Christian portion of the academy has not stated its purpose as clearly because of certain complicating factors. For example, the costs of international programs can be expensive. The programs at Christian colleges and universities are not as quickly funded by business interests because the approach and questions asked at Christian colleges may not be palatable to a business. The secular approach that promotes competition is more palatable and more aligned with the mission and goals of secular companies.

At the onset, Christian institutions argued that the term *globalization* be replaced by the better term *internationalization* because *internationalization* does not connote the philosophy associated with the term *globalization*. However, carrying on the semantic discussion did little to help Christian institutions of higher education. Instead, Christian colleges today are responding to the challenges and opportunities of globalization in three ways: service, evangelization, and education.

### **Service**

Service is frequently the most visible outreach activity on campuses of Christian colleges. Volunteer clubs connect students with community needs through such activities as raking leaves for the elderly, visiting retirement homes, participating in Big Brother or Big Sister programs, or being involved in similar activities that provide assistance. This assistance takes on an international component when students seek to address as well as experience the needs in cultural backgrounds different from their own; the assistance becomes international when students go to other countries. Their offer of assistance comes from wanting to show love to their neighbor, to be witnesses of Christ's love and mercy, and to serve humanity. A cup of cold water delivered in Christ's name becomes their goal. Service projects become the impetus of extending campus activity in another country, and students develop charity, sensitivity, and a desire to help the less fortunate.

### **Evangelization**

A second emphasis or activity for some col-

leges is mission trips that aim to share the Gospel. In such activities, evangelism is frequently intertwined with service, but the purpose clearly becomes one of outreach and preaching the Gospel. Students will travel to other countries as part of a foreign-missions program to share the Gospel by assisting at churches and schools that have developed extensive programs of evangelism. The work helps students understand the international dimension of the church, promotes the spread of the Gospel, and helps prepare the student for a future in missions.

### **Education**

A third emphasis is the educational program that immerses students in different world cultures. In this kind of program, they learn the history, current events, language, and community of these cultures. New foods, different languages, and new people force students to step outside their small comfortable world to develop their knowledge, improve their sensitivity, and expand their horizons. This education is carried out in the context of a curriculum and an academic environment. The emphases in this kind of program—service, evangelism, and education—occur in the context of the college's mission statement; and the activities are generally carried out in the name of Jesus Christ.

As students are changed by their experience in a different cultural setting, their sensitivities increase dramatically. Simplistic solutions to world issues are replaced with an awareness of the complexity and difficulties that affect possible solutions. Students discover that the distribution of foreign aid is complex. For example, the distribution of subsidized edible beans to a less-developed country often supports and enhances the edible-bean market in the donating country while depressing the edible-bean market for the farmers in the receiving country. What initially seemed to be a benevolent and generous gesture becomes a burden to a struggling edible-bean producer who is already poor and will now become poorer.

If we accept Sine's assertion that globalization is the number-one force that will shape our lives, churches, and communities, it is not clear how our colleges will adjust to its force. Service, evangelization, and education—all good and important

activities—skirt the issues delineated in the supporting pillars of globalization and the issues that surround them. Serving others is important and should be part of every Christian life, but if it treats problems without addressing their causes or assisting in permanent solutions, it has failed. An awareness of causes may grow in students while they are serving another culture, but addressing the causes is often not integral to serving.

Evangelizing, an obviously laudable and needed activity, requires specific knowledge of the culture being evangelized if it is to be effective. Students must understand another culture's system of justice in order to judge the appropriateness of their activities in relationship to the pillars. Evangelism may focus the globalization discussion so narrowly that it fails to consider the developments contributing to the problems of globalization.

And while educating students about other cultures is positive, such educating frequently occurs only in the context of another discipline. As a result, the motivating force for the course and its activities emphasizes such things as history, art, language, political structure, customs, foods, and sensitivities to human differences. While such educational programs sensitize students to the process of globalization, they may obscure the way sensitization occurs, since each program's mission and goals emphasize one of only three categories—service, evangelism, or education. These emphases may even include subdivisions along program lines or areas of the discipline.

### **Response**

The explicitness of the secular institution's goals, in contrast to those of the Christian institution, can be attributed to the foundation of those goals: the promotion of competitive advantage and economic expedience. The foundation of the Christian approach, by contrast, is more fragmented and does not address globalization directly. Can the Christian faith expose and confront the challenges of globalization? The obvious answer is yes.

The challenge for the Christian college is to connect the Gospel to life. Such a solution may sound simple until we study the complexities of such a connection. For example, while aid from a secular

group appears similar to aid from a Christian group, its motives do not. One country can help another country build a road into a jungle area, which can improve access or commerce, while the true motive may be to allow military access to a region in order to control an insurgent native population. The Christian motive would be the transporting of

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medical supplies, the supplying of water-purification equipment, or the curing and preventing of disease. Since the differences may be obscured, challenge to the Christian college lies in unmasking those differences. In its education, it must show how globalization differs when motivated by the love of Jesus and the desire to promote justice and love for one's neighbor.

As Christian colleges, prompted by the force of globalization, have moved with urgency to keep up with international developments, haste has sometimes prevented us from integrating principles into programs dealing with globalization. How do we do missions in a serving manner, or do we model a form of paternalism by the very way we design programs? Creating awareness, sensitivity, and a desire to counter the undesirable aspects of globalization should be included in educating students.

Christian institutions face the challenge of articulating a clear purpose to guide their cross-cultural programs. Our response to globalization

should include a clear definition of how the program will develop, how students will understand the problems of globalization, and how they will become aware of potential solutions after they graduate.

The approach that a college or university takes to globalization should be informed and evaluated by God's biblically revealed standards and ordinances, which call men and women to lives of praise and service to Him. A danger is that as the pillars supporting globalization affect us culturally and as our culture adapts to the globalization process, we become more immersed culturally and lose our ability to develop a truly Reformed response, which is a holistic approach. A holistic approach to globalization has often included the Gospel, for example building a hospital as part of the mission outreach or building schools with churches to promote the well-being of the population. However, globalization tends to reduce life to specialized entities instead of considering the total well-being of the person. To counter such reductionism, the biblical emphases on love, faithfulness, justice, stewardship, and fruit-bearing will return us to a distinctive approach to globalization.

While the four pillars guide our response to the effects of globalization, we must ask if our program supports our cause of serving Christ and seeking His Kingdom. How are praise, love, faithfulness, justice, stewardship, and fruit-bearing integrated into our response to globalization? Only clear answers that reflect our mission, direction, and purpose will carry the Kingdom of God into globalization.

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