The Urgent Demands of the Present: Missiological Discernment in a Wounded World

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Abstract

This article considers implications of the IAMS 15th Assembly theme “Powers, Inequalities, and Vulnerabilities: Mission in a Wounded World.” After describing the theme’s origins and reflecting on wounds and woundedness in Christian mission, it develops a framework to consider missiology shaped by the theme, that is, when prioritizing mission as constituted by its setting in a wounded world shaped by powers, inequalities, and vulnerabilities. After presenting that framework, which features the medical terms triage, diagnosis, therapy, and prophylaxis, it offers brief and tentative missiological discernment of the present moment, highlighting, besides climate change, 1) rampant religious disaffiliation among onetime Christians and 2) intra-Christian polarization and divisions as particularly urgent priorities for missional engagement and contemporary mission studies.

Keywords


Kevin Considine writes, “The problem of the barbarous excess of human suffering is becoming the main question of global Christianity” (Considine 2015:38). Even if not every Christian’s main question, the scope of the world’s suffering, or woundedness, can certainly be daunting. Prioritizing mission in a wounded world thus responds to an evident reality, appearing instinctively salutary and commendable. This paper will unfold the logic of framing mission as taking...
place in a wounded world, as well as implications arising from such a framing for scholars of mission.

It will first describe conversations generating the theme of the 15th Assembly of the International Association for Mission Studies (IAMS): “Powers, Inequalities, and Vulnerabilities: Mission in a Wounded World.” A second part explores ways that wounds and woundedness have shaped Christian mission. Then follows a framework that emerges from prioritizing a wounded world as a setting for mission. A fourth section presents a tentative missiological discernment for a contemporary world shaped by woundedness.

1 Discerning a Theme

The theme for IAMS’ 15th Assembly emerged after a June 2017 discussion among Executive Committee members. That conversation, held at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana, US, was the sole in-person meeting of the IAMS Executive Committee during our tenure, a tenure extended two years by COVID-19.

The eventual title – “Powers, Inequalities, and Vulnerabilities: Mission in a Wounded World” – originated during meandering and sometimes contentious conversations that unfolded, retrospectively, in several stages. We first agreed upon a general theme, captured in the post-colon part of the title, “Mission in a Wounded World.” We sought to capture our conviction that mission – understood broadly as God’s redemptive activity in the world, enacted in cooperation with human persons; prototypically Christian mission, though not unrestrictedly Christian (Kollman 2022) – always proceeds in settings characterized by woundedness. Our consciousness of that always/already wounded world has intensified as awareness grows about how these wounds afflict a broader range of realities. Woundedness modifies not only bodies but minds and spirits; not only individual persons but communities; not only humans but other living creatures; not only living beings but cosmological/cyclical aspects of our planet’s processes that are non-biological; not only present realities but the past as remembered and the future as envisioned; not only contexts for personal and collective action but perspectival horizons in which to consider reality and concomitant human responsibility.

Another discussion concerned prepositions, again after the colon. The choice of the preposition “in” as part of “mission in a wounded world” came after rejecting “for,” as in “mission for a wounded world.” The phrase “mission for a wounded world” implied a self-appointed status as guardian-rescuer amid wounds. It risked suggesting an unwillingness to admit that Christian mission,
amid its professed desire to bless and heal, has also wounded. We wanted to acknowledge the complicity of Christian mission in hurtful processes. The historical record is too bound by ambiguity, too linked with ambivalence among even many of its supporters, to think of mission as unequivocally an exercise in unalloyed benevolence and betterment.

Each of the nouns before the colon was chosen to draw attention to shared and differentiating realities among us. We all partake in a single mission amid wounds and share a single yet complex predicament and responsibility, yet diverse positionalities situate us. All have power in various modalities, yet some more than others. We also participate in powers in the plural, which operate with or without conscious awareness. All experience inequality, yet different vectors define that inequality, locating us distinctly, sometimes in oppositional relations. All know vulnerability – a word derived from Latin for “wound,” *vulnus*, linked to “to wound,” *vulnerare* – yet some more than others. And inequality and vulnerability also operate as plurals, since we participate in them due to diverse belongings and situatedness.

As we planned in June 2017, we had no idea what lay ahead. Already we recognized the terrifying prospect of global climate change. In addition, we noted growing populist political movements that seemed dangerously nationalistic, movements preaching the virtues of a romanticized past captured in Zygmunt Bauman’s *Retrotopia* (2017) and by Svetlana Boym’s notion of “restorative nostalgia” (2001). We recognized, too, that inequality seemed to be expanding as global economic forces shifted more resources into fewer hands. Yet we could not then anticipate that our Assembly, scheduled for July 2020, would be postponed due to the global pandemic.

The pandemic’s unfolding, an ongoing assault on our well-being, reinforced instincts producing the Assembly’s theme. Here I consider their implications for contemporary missiology, while also being mindful of the intervening years. What does a missiology that takes the world’s woundedness seriously look like? How does close attention to powers, inequalities, and vulnerabilities shape such a missiology? And what are the implications of conceptualizing mission in this way in light of COVID-19?

**Christian Mission amid Wounds: Christ’s, the World’s, and the Church’s**

Prioritizing a wounded world as a context for Christian mission orients missional attention, for example, in examining Scripture and Christianity’s history. Amid many references to wounds in Scripture, the most vivid evocation
for most Christians comes late in John’s Gospel. After the resurrection, Jesus appears to his disciples, and John, uniquely among the evangelists, highlights the prominence of Jesus’s wounds. After greeting them with “Peace be with you,” the text reads, “When [Jesus] had said this, he showed them his hands and his side” (Jn 20:19b–20). The significance of Jesus’ display is amplified when Thomas, not present, doubts the account shared by the others. Thomas proclaims, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger into the nail-marks and put my hand into his side, I will not believe” (Jn 20:25b). When Jesus returns a week later, he says to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands, and bring your hand and put it into my side, and do not be unbelieving, but believe” (Jn 20:27). John’s gospel is the only place where this scene occurs, as it is the only gospel that mentions the spear thrust into Jesus’ side as he hangs on the cross (Jn 19:34).

This New Testament evidence has long been seen to confirm that Jesus’ crucifixion involved him being nailed to the cross, since some of the crucified in the ancient world were tied to the cross without being nailed (Evans 2015:109–130). The risen body of Jesus, Christians believe, was a body bearing wounds.

IAMS’ 15th Assembly is not the first time that wounds have been linked to Christian mission. Indeed, Christ’s wounds subtly evoke mission already in John’s Gospel. Once Thomas, having seen the risen Jesus with his wounds, says “My Lord and my God!” (John 20:28), Jesus then remarks, “Have you come to believe because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed” (John 20:29). Jesus anticipates that many will accept him through the first witnesses of his risen, wounded body, though later believers will not see the wounds themselves. Yet the later generation’s faith – those deemed “blessed” by Jesus – will know those wounds, almost as an absence brought to reality for them through missional witness to the risen and wounded Christ. One need not have the vivid first-person actuality experienced by those first witnesses of the risen Christ, Jesus’s words suggest, to be deemed part of the blessed community defined by Jesus. As Saint Paul would write, “[W]e walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Cor 5:7).

Christ’s wounds remembered and meditated upon have long inspired Christians to pursue mission in various forms. Medieval Christians developed personal and communal devotions to Jesus’ “Five Wounds,” inspired by theological reflection from Bernard of Clairvaux, Mechtilde of Magdeburg, Gertrude of Helfta, and others. These devotions continue to the present day and have inspired Catholic religious communities and laity to pursue Christian mission through the centuries.

1 All quotations from the Bible are from the New American Bible Revised Edition.
One historically significant mission-related inspiration linked directly to the wounds of Christ occurred among 18th-century Moravians motivated by the “blood and wounds theology” of Count Nicholas Zinzendorf. This rather lurid theology has been linked to an embarrassing episode of alleged debauchery in Moravian history – the so-called “Sifting Times” of the mid-18th century – yet recent research has absolved the theology itself from association with such abuses (Atwood 2006). It stresses that Moravian missionary zeal, generating ground-breaking Protestant evangelization in the Americas and elsewhere, drew inspiration from ardent devotion to the wounds of Christ. Moravian liturgies featured the recitation of different “Litanies of Wounds,” first in Europe and later in international mission in the Caribbean, in Pennsylvania, and southern Africa. Imagery linked the side wound of Christ to a birth canal of Christian disciples, something already present in early Christianity (Vogt 2009:102–103). Meditation on the wounds of Christ forged missionary enthusiasm both among European Moravian missionaries and converts, nourishing them in their worldwide mission.

Recent missiological reflection invoking wounds reflects a shift. Instead of stressing pious devotion from contemplation of Christ’s wounds as inspiring mission, it primarily focuses on the world’s woundedness and suffering as the context of that mission, a context those engaged in mission also share. It partakes in what Stephen Bevans sees as “a fundamental shift from a missiology of power to a missiology of relationship and vulnerability” (Bevans 2010:8). The 2019 meeting of the European Association for Mission Studies (IAMS Europe), for example, anticipated the IAMS Assembly itself, taking as its theme “Locating European Missions in a Wounded World.” The papers covered a range of topics, many featuring close attention to the historical suffering of Europe or contemporary European ecclesial and pastoral crises, and offering potential contemporary missional responses.²

Many papers at the meeting reflect with theological sophistication on the implications of Christian responses to woundedness, and several drew clear connections between Christ’s woundedness and that of the church and the world. Miriam Leidinger presents a systematic theological approach to vulnerability, taking seriously both parts of the word: vulnera, that is, woundedness, and “ability,” emphasizing the capacities for faith-based responses, capacities that remain despite being wounded. Stressing the need to acknowledge the ambivalence of vulnerability – that is, its negative links to victimization along with its affirmative openness – Leidinger foregrounds contemporary

² Some papers from the meeting can be found in Mission Studies volumes 37:3 (2020) and 38:1 (2021).
theologians who construct Christologies that link following the wounded Christ in discipleship with concomitant responsive postures to a wounded world (Leidinger 2020; also Gruber 2020).

Another prominent theme at the IAMS Europe meeting concerned awareness of mission’s complicity in past wrongdoing. This has long, if unevenly, been recognized in mission studies (Lupieri 2011). In 1968, at a meeting of US Catholic theologians to consider the realities of mission in the wake of Vatican II, William Cantwell Smith, a leading Protestant figure in religious studies, said,

The wounds that we [Christians in the West] have inflicted on the world in the last 150 years have got to be recognized. Any conference on missions that doesn’t start with some kind of penitence and real sensitivity to the hurt that we have inflicted and that we continue to inflict is just not Christian.

Instinctive embrace of unmitigated enthusiasm for missionary practice and bold confidence in Christians’ ability to evangelize without causing harm has yielded in recent years to a missional way of attentiveness, shaped by cultural and historical awareness. The latter is a missiology shaped by consciousness of unsought woundedness linked to mission.

And within the profound suffering of the world—nearly infinite in its scope—there is also suffering in the Body of Christ itself, understood as God’s people in the world, which also draws missiological attention. This includes today the dispersal and afflictions undergone by the ancient Christian communities of western Asia (or the Middle East), some groups of whom face extinction or, at least, erasure from homes inhabited for millennia, which has rapidly accelerated in this third millennium. Christians also face persecution and restriction in many countries that do not allow religious liberty.

Tragically, some of the deepest wounds suffered by Christians are at least partially self-inflicted. Divisions among Christians are ancient to be sure, yet unprecedented divisions have afflicted global Christian bodies like the Anglican Communion and the Orthodox churches, the latter especially recently, a situation which likely will only be exacerbated by the war and violence in the Ukraine. The Catholic Church has also faced horrible self-inflicted wounds due to evidence of child abuse by clergy and efforts to hide it and protect perpetrators. In my own country, the US, the Catholic Church increasingly manifests the destructive polarization that has shaped our politics over
The past decades, displayed in the attack on the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021 (Borghese 2021). Many Protestant bodies also face internal divisions, with tensions arising between Pentecostal and evangelical Christians, on the one hand, and those more ecumenically minded on the other, divisions that are sometimes bitter indeed.

Here I want to explore the significance for mission studies of the interrelated wounds of Christ, the world, and the church. I want to analyze their Christological, missiological, and ecclesiological significance today, underscored by Saint Paul’s depiction of the followers of Jesus as the Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12–13). God’s holy people are always a wounded people who bear marks of suffering that endure, marks not transformed into scars, one-time wounds that to some extent have healed. Though embracing the life-giving power of the cross of Christ and his resurrection, our embodiment as followers of Jesus is a wounded one, foreshadowed in Christ’s risen Body bearing wounds. This includes efforts to follow Jesus through mission, that is, prototypically by making him known, loved, and served by others, as well as other ways of participating in the missio Dei. And keeping that in mind helps us better embody disciples of a wounded Messiah, lessening the risk that we imagine ourselves to be messianic on our own. Saint Paul’s link between the Body of Christ as both followers of Jesus and the body of the risen Messiah – eternally wounded, and historically both wounded and wounding – frames this missiological discussion.

The next section considers mission amid woundedness through medical terms. It begins with triage, since the overwhelming volume, severity, and complexity of woundedness, as well as finite resources to respond to them, suggests inevitable missiological sorting and prioritization analogous to the work of medical professionals facing difficult decisions. Then will follow discussion of missiological instincts approximating diagnosis and therapy. Sometimes needs are acute, demanding immediate therapeutic care. More commonly, further diagnosis is necessary. Increasingly, the world’s wounds invite a fourth missiological practice analogous to the medical term prophylaxis, or prevention. The need for such prophylaxis derives from theological reflection linked to trauma and critical memory studies, which discloses both the long-term wounding that people suffer and ways that such wounds incline victims to become perpetrators of future violence and subsequent wounding.

The framework here offered is not a formula or series of steps to follow in a circular or dialectical process for missional engagement. Highlighting some steps seeks to make usually implicit processes more critical and missiologically self-conscious, while attending to the 21st century from a missional perspective.
3 Missiology for a Wounded World

3.1 Triage

Starting in the 1790s, the French word “trier,” meaning “to sort,” was adapted to create the word “triage” (Robertson-Steel 2006). Over succeeding years, triage developed to mean the rapid assessment of the ill and wounded to prioritize their treatment, especially when numerous medical crises appear at once, typically during warfare or in the wake of disasters.

Triage has imperfect analogues in contemporary Christian practice. Relief efforts in emergencies by Christian bodies occur quickly, part of the missio Dei in which the faithful participate, such as in various faith-inspired responses to the Ukraine’s suffering as this essay underwent completion. Triage of a sort also happens publicly, as when Christian leaders like the Archbishop of Canterbury or Orthodox patriarchs offer reflections on the state of the world, identifying global crises and prioritizing settings of particular need. Perhaps best known among global Christian leaders for such a regular analysis, the Pope offers twice per year the Urbi et Orbi address, literally “to the city [of Rome, of which the Pope is bishop] and the world,” his triage of the world’s wounds. These addresses and accompanying blessings occur around Christmas and Easter, drawing attention to formidable and often overlooked crises needing the world’s urgent attention. Humanitarian emergencies or political conflicts fraught with potential global consequences tend to figure prominently. Recently climate change has also been regularly invoked as a deadly specter.

When Pope Francis, soon after his election, said, “I see the church as a field hospital after battle,” he, perhaps unconsciously, moved beyond traditional Catholic encouragement of the corporal works of mercy and invoked the notion of triage (Spadaro 2013). This evocation of the church as a field hospital has inspired many others who appreciate an ecclesiological image that emphasizes how God’s people ought to emulate God’s mercy. Field hospitals constitute prototypical sites of triage, assigning categories to the wounded to coordinate care by rapidly assigning priority for optimal results given the situation and available resources.

Of course, Christian mission does not carry out triage exactly as in field hospitals, since it does not envision necessary choices between death and life. Moreover, demanding as it is, and never fully completed since it is always subject to reconsideration, triage is also by definition temporary, designed to end so that other processes can unfold. It yields naturally to further steps, generating an order for action so that the most urgent problems are – all other things being equal – dealt with first.
3.2 Diagnosis and Therapy

Many Christian bodies take as some part of their mission the rescue and care of the most desperate. Faith-based responses to immediate crisis partake in missional therapy, understood broadly. Yet very often, more comprehensive mission-minded therapy depends on diagnosis beyond the immediate responses that the term triage seeks to capture, that is, ongoing assessment. Diagnosis thus refers to the process of determining the nature of a problem so that therapy can be an effective response. In a wounded world, missiological diagnosis pursues understanding the nature of wounds, while missiological therapy seeks to ameliorate or heal them, sometimes simply through witness and accompaniment.

Christian mission history records many earnest believers, individuals and collective bodies, trying to read the signs of the times to identify a place, community, or issue calling for missionary engagement. Mission-minded Christians have often diagnosed the need to send missionaries to places where onetime Christian faith has eroded, or where the Gospel was as yet unheard, or Christian faith was otherwise absent. Increasingly, mission has come to have as one of its primary referents the latter, that is, the evangelization of non-Christians.

Sometimes, recognition of pressing humanitarian needs accompanied the felt need for Christian evangelization, such as in the formation of several early Protestant voluntary missionary societies that were motivated by slavery’s horrible costs. Such wounds caused by the slave-trading and enslaving practices of their own fellow citizens in, for instance, Great Britain joined the desire to expand Christian faith as mission motivations (Ott 2021:158–189). One hears similar echoes in certain missionary strategies that seek to evangelize in the so-called “10–40 window,” the degrees of north latitude where human suffering and non-Christians allegedly cluster and overlap (Griswold 2010). If triage assesses and prioritizes among forms of woundedness, diagnosis analyzes specific examples of woundedness to understand them. And after analyzing a place, community, or issue with critical awareness, diagnosis helps identify ways to respond.

Necessary as it is, the history of such diagnosis among Christian missionar- ies is fraught with the ambiguities within mission history, including involvement in colonial domination (Samson 2004). That history is a reminder of the danger of self-affirming missiological analyses that reinforce instincts already in place, which historically have been linked to evolutionist and racist

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3 Therapy is thus more than psychological treatment featuring conversation between patient and counsellor.
assumptions, while today, in other deficient heterologies, they are sometimes linked to presumptive and ethnocentric developmental models. As fellow IAMs Assembly plenary speaker Emmanuel Katongole has warned, we must be wary of “prescriptive haste” (Katongole 2011:32–33) that follows from incomplete diagnoses.

Therapy in this framework takes the form of what is often simply called mission itself, or mission in practice. And, certainly, a vast array of human discourses and practices have constituted Christian mission over the past two millennia. While pride of place in identifying Christian mission has often been reserved to proselytism among the unconverted – sometimes called evangelism, “primary evangelization,” or mission ad gentes – other faith-inspired postures and practices have come to embody mission as well. These include the witness of a faith-filled life and the previously noted direct humanitarian service, even when faith has little overt place.

3.3 Prophylaxis

Missiological prophylaxis, understood in the framework under consideration here as mission-minded efforts to prevent wounding in the future, has taken various forms in traditional mission practices. For instance, institution-building that creates conditions for future well-being in the construction of hospitals and schools, as well as in efforts to reinforce civil society, represent longstanding missionary preoccupations. In a related vein, contemporary peace studies shaped by a missional understanding, exemplified by John Paul Lederach’s approach to moral imagination, also seeks to prevent future wounding by defusing sources of violence (Lederach 2004). For Lederach, expanded moral imagination encourages the establishing and maintaining of peace.

The prevention of wounding through missiological prophylaxis becomes more important with growing awareness that many of the world’s wounds that missional diagnosis might detect have long genealogies and persist without resolution or healing, often for years. Such wounds can certainly be dire, symptoms of profound harm suffered by individuals and people groups; they can also be dangerous because their ongoing nature creates conditions for future wounding as, to paraphrase the title of a book about the 1994 killings in Rwanda, “victims [can] become killers” (Mamdani 2001). As will become clear, my own missiological assessment of the current moment finds such wounds among the most pressing of concerns for contemporary reflection.

Awareness of the ways that wounds – especially collective psychological ones affecting large groups – can persist, connects missiological reflection on prophylaxis to critical memory studies and the work of theologians who
consider Christian faith in light of trauma theory. Critical memory studies, to oversimplify, assumes the perspective here captured pithily by Daniel Gilbert: “Memory is not a dutiful scribe that keeps a complete transcript of our experiences, but a sophisticated editor that clips and saves key elements of an experience and then uses these elements to rewrite the story each time we ask to reread it” (Gilbert 2007:217). Remembering, both individually and collectively, thus has profound social and political – as well as missiological – implications.

Meanwhile, trauma theory has discerned how some human suffering, even when physical symptoms on bodily surfaces disappear, persists in memory and ongoing affliction, with a particular mindfulness of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD; Rambo 2019). Others have sought to expand that individual perspective to that faced by communities that face collective violence, who also undergo similar persistent wounding (Máté-Tóth 2020).

These metaphors of triage, diagnosis, therapy, and prophylaxis have missiological analogues particularly needed as Christians cope with a wounded world. Better skills at something like triage respond to the vastness of the world’s woundedness and the limits within capacities to respond. The complexity of the world’s wounds demands diagnosis that is sophisticated and humble. Missional practice as therapy acknowledges and addresses those wounds, and is participation in the mission of Christ incumbent on those who would follow him. And prophylaxis becomes more important as trauma studies and critical memory studies yield insight into how wounds persist long past physical evidence, reemerging to threaten both survivors and the common good.

4 Discerning Missional Priorities and Postures in a Wounded World

I conclude here with a brief exercise in missiological discernment in light of this medicalized framework. There has been some discussion of discernment in Christian mission (Kim 2005), including recent articles on missiological discernment in the wake of the current pandemic (Danielson et al. 2020; Howell 2021). Discernment, however, has not been developed missiologically in any systematic way that I have found. Nor will this reflection seek such a systematic analysis. Instead it is carried out self-consciously as president of IAMS, since this essay is written as the basis for my presidential address to be given in Sydney in July 2022. I also present this tentatively, mindful that both my role and many other aspects of my own subjectivity, some of them of which I am unaware, shape these ideas. Anxious as I am to have my reflections draw upon others’ experiences, both within the world Christian movement and beyond, it
would be naïve of me to imagine that what is offered here represents an objective viewpoint with a universal and comprehensive perspective. It reflects most assuredly my own subject-position with all its limitations.

Among those features is my claim to Christian faith. Though IAMS is not formally a faith-based association, faith not being required for membership, these remarks reflect my faith, shared by many IAMS members, in which the wounds of Christ, the world, and the church all shape missional faithfulness. They are an attempt to advance mission studies in light of a wounded world.

4.1 Missional Triaging of the World’s Wounds

There is certainly an artificiality to adapting triage to missiological reflection. Medical triage assumes that those requiring care are individuals whose severity of condition, need for rapid treatment, exposure to ongoing damage, and likelihood of a good outcome all are weighed. To perform triage is to decide who might live if given care, and who is likely to die with or without care. Potential problems to address through Christian mission have no such obvious concreteness, for mission operates on a larger canvas, with many potential factors to weigh and no obvious way to compare them. In addition, mission is not chosen on the basis of individuals facing extreme danger.

This creates apparent incommensurability among different constructions of the afflictions of a wounded world, making it hard to identify criteria for comparison in order to assign priority. How, for example, might one judge among the needs of desperate refugees crossing the Mediterranean for Europe, the rapid degradation of the Amazonian rain forests, and the need to galvanize Christian churches in South Sudan to become agents for peace? And how do these crises—humanitarian, ecological, political—weigh against the long-term missional priority of proclaiming Christ as the Messiah? Lacking obvious criteria, how can one judge among the world’s wounds to determine priority for mission?

And yet, despite this artificiality, something like triage seems inevitable in discerning mission priorities. After all, awareness of the wounds of the world means that anyone desirous of participating in God’s mission risks being overwhelmed by the volume, varieties, and complex interplays of such woundedness. And God’s desire to heal knows no limits, we surely believe, so that our efforts to cooperate in that healing theoretically also know no limits. Yet to act at all in a missional way implies a choice among potential options.

Acknowledging the artificiality and accepting the inevitability of triage, there remain other formidable challenges. One lies in uncertainty about who is doing the triage. I try to speak here on behalf of mission studies as IAMS president, yet that begs the question: Is it individual Christian scholars who
discern how to participate in the missio Dei? Or local Christian communities in which scholars are embedded? Or global bodies like the Assemblies of God or the Franciscans? Or academic bodies like IAMS as a collective? Each has a different realistic potential for missional engagement.

This is crucial because sorting through different aspects of a wounded world with mission-like engagement in mind unavoidably presumes awareness of varying measures of power in those discerning and pondering. Medical triage operates with an understanding that some afflictions are beyond help, at least in light of current capacities, while others can be addressed. What are the capacities for missional action that govern anyone undertaking missiological triage?

Another challenge arises because not everything that reflects grave woundedness can be properly addressed by Christian mission, at least as ordinarily understood. When one thinks of the woundedness linked to simmering international conflicts that potentially could overflow with disastrous global consequences, for example – the currently ongoing conflict in Ukraine in light of Russia’s invasion, or potentially between China and Taiwan, in Yemen between proxies of Saudi Arabia and Iran, or linked to North Korea’s unpredictability – one must acknowledge the limits of any Christian missional power to respond effectively. Of course, one can imagine missional ways to respond to each – as faith-based individuals or organizations imagine their activities as cooperating with God’s own hidden ways – yet limits exist and Christian mission, as normally understood, is not the obvious immediate response.

Global racism and climate change which reflect a wounded world, and continue to inflict wounds all the time, recognized and unrecognized, similarly seem to require power for an impactful response that eludes ordinary missional practice. Yet many Christians have discerned some power and responsibility to act, even if in small ways. The point is simple. Another question that complicates missiological triage is this: is Christian mission the right response to this sort of woundedness?

Different short-term and longer-term aspects of vulnerability represent another closely related complicating factor to consider, when orienting missionary energy and attention to triage that fulfills missional responsibility. Vulnerability can refer to existing woundedness as well as the potential for new woundedness, called by Judith Butler precarity (Leidinger 2020:404–407), the latter closely related to ability to avoid further suffering given one’s circumstances. Unarmed populations facing imminent invasion are usually more vulnerable than the citizens of the countries mounting the invasion. What in a situation creates precarity that shifts priorities in any act of missiological triage?
In considering the potential of Christian mission and, by extension, mission studies in addressing a wounded world, I see three long-term threatening trends that merit attention. Forestalling them is incumbent on those concerned with Christian mission, and decisive action is called for. The first threatens the world itself as we have come to know and depend upon it: global climate change. The second is rapidly growing religious disaffiliation among Christians in the secularized West. A third long-term threat I discern, which like the others invites serious missional consideration, lies in the growing polarization among Christians that is occurring in a number of predominantly Christian countries.

Facing the climate crisis adequately will, I believe, require degrees of global cooperation never before achieved. All share some degree of accountability for addressing climate change, yet this does not lessen Christian responsibility. I am not going to address global climate change at much length here. This is not because it is not an urgent threat – of course it is – but for several other reasons, one being simply the limited scope of an article like this and awareness that others have been addressing it missionaly (Jenkins 2008). In addition, it is hard to generalize about the capacity of IAMs members – a diverse group, mostly scholars – to address global climate change in a missiological way. The complexities of the issue, including significant differences across the globe in capacities for action (or power), degrees of vulnerability, and inequalities in causes of, and negative effects from, the changing climate, make missionary practices as normally understood hard to apply to its varying aspects. These include, for example, national and regional policies around fossil fuel use, commitment to green technologies and research, mitigation of deleterious effects of climate change on vulnerable populations, personal and collective sacrifice, and willingness to make shared international agreements that change consumption patterns.

Moreover, though Christians have been perhaps responsible for climate change more than any other religious body, and though some Christian theological approaches to creation arguably have encouraged irresponsible approaches to ecological responsibility, the trends looking ahead differ. Christians likely will decrease as contributors to global climate change and missiological reflection has addressed environmental stewardship with growing sophistication. This is exemplified by Pope Francis’s \textit{Laudato Si’}, which has expanded awareness among many of the implications of faith for the care of creation. Given these factors, our largest role as scholars of mission likely lies in strengthening Christians’ commitments to act on this issue collectively by urging an abiding embrace of truth, not only faith-based but also scientific truth.
The other two challenges both engage Christians especially and thus have, in my mind, a certain heightened priority for those who care directly about Christian mission.

4.2 Diagnosing Religious Disaffiliation and Polarization

Widespread religious disaffiliation reflects an ongoing secularization process that has a long history and is taking place today at a rapid rate in most of the countries that sent Christian missionaries around the world in the 19th and 20th centuries. Linked to complex processes that have lessened the place of Christianity in public and private life, it also reflects dissatisfaction with Christian religious bodies whose ambiguous moral histories weigh upon current and onetime believers.

I have come to believe that scholars of mission, including me, have accepted this with more equanimity than we should. Aware as we are of burgeoning growth elsewhere in the world Christian movement, missiologists can ignore the potentially catastrophic consequences of the de-churching of once-and-now-less-and-less Christian people-groups. I believe firmly that Christian mission must face more seriously the need to evangelize those who, while often admitting the world’s woundedness, including their own, no longer find Jesus Christ and Christian communities credible sources of healing for those wounds, and providing for their other spiritual needs.

Such religious disaffiliation takes many forms. It includes strident atheists, some advancing philosophical arguments against religious beliefs and pursuing policy changes to sideline religion from public life. Yet those kinds of self-conscious rejections of faith are arguably less worrisome than another trend. Captured in pithy sayings – for example, this first line from a novel by Julian Barnes, “I don’t believe in God, but I miss him” (Barnes 2008:1) – it reflects the feelings of those who reflexively live in a way in which God, existing or not, no longer matters. Philosopher Raymond Geuss observes:

I suspect that the real danger for religious believers nowadays is not counter-belief or theoretical objections, but indifference…. This increase in sheer brute indifference – Why should we care one way or the other? – rather than active unbelief or unwillingness to listen seems to me to be the social phenomenon which constitutes the greatest threat to traditional forms of monotheism.

P. Geuss 2012:165

4 Some have even cited Christian mission itself as a cause, though that claim seems overstated (Kruithof 2021).
From my admittedly limited vantage point, this describes a great deal of the implicit experience of those who walk away from Christian belonging and practice without regret. And churches struggle to know how to reach such people. US Catholic spiritual writer Ron Rolheiser sees this articulated well by the Czech theologian Tomáš Halík, for whom “Christianity in the West is undergoing a ‘noon-day fatigue’, a writer’s block, a crisis of imagination.” For Rolheiser, Halík reinforces the diagnosis offered in A Secular Age by philosopher Charles Taylor: “For Taylor, what we are experiencing today is not so much a crisis of faith as a crisis of imagination and integration” (Rolheiser 2017).

In light of the wounded world, the suffering of secularized residents of the global West, or minority world, can seem small indeed, especially compared to extreme poverty still afflicting far too many as well as violence due to armed conflict. Yet it is not thereby insignificant. In fact, escalating rates of acute crises of mental health, heightened awareness of ongoing yawning inequalities among certain demographic groups as distinguished by racial classification, and soaring rates of what some experts call “deaths of despair” (Case and Deaton 2020) – suicide, drug overdoses, and alcohol-caused liver disease, in particular – suggest that wounds persist and might even be growing, magnified by the pandemic.

This is no small matter for those who care about global Christianity and Christian mission. Paul Gifford’s The Plight of Western Religion is one eloquent analysis of this trend, and Gifford notes that the US, once seen as an exception to a mostly European trend, now embodies it fully. Gifford writes ominously, “This eclipsing of the other-worldly constitutes a watershed in human history, with profound consequences not just for religious institutions but for our entire world order” (Gifford 2019:68).

This departure from faith among many in once-Christian countries has helped foster the third threat noted, polarization among Christians, since shared religious loyalties join the presence of external enemies as among the most galvanizing of experiences that generate social bonds. Such polarization – moral, ideological, theological, political – has been exacerbated more recently by populist political movements that question longstanding norms of democratic governance, many of them in the global West and drawing impetus from Christian narratives (Goldberg 2007; Whitehead & Perry 2020). Sometimes such populism is joined to hyper-spiritualized forms of Christianity, approaches to faith that resist the authority of science. These include contesting scientific evidence relied upon to encourage efforts to address climate change as well as policies to control the spread of COVID-19.

Some of those linked with populism pursue distinct public policy goals, many becoming markers of Christian identity in the places where such
movements gain their strength. Such markers include immigration restrictions, protection of unfettered faith-based exclusions of LGBTQ citizens from certain social roles (often defended by reference to religious liberty), and affirmations of social policies that reinforce other traditional norms around gender and sexuality. At the same time, many of those who embrace such populisms also possess a sense of entitlement and belonging that they feel has not been honored, implicitly often linked to national, racial, and/or religious identity. So-called “white nationalism” in the US exemplifies this, and Christian symbols were evident in the January 6, 2021 attack on the US Capitol.

It can be tempting to dismiss those embracing such populisms as unworthy of dialogue, especially from a comfortable vantage where such worldviews are scarce, such as Western academe. Even theologians who draw upon contemporary trauma theory have focused, understandably, on the suffering of groups that have faced historical marginalization through racism, sexism, and other forms of social exclusion. Yet ignoring the analogous, if quite different, traumas motivating right-wing populism, I believe, ignores real wounds, and only exacerbates crippling polarization. In many such movements across the globe – in the US, Hungary, Poland, the United Kingdom, Germany, Brazil, Serbia, even Russia – traumas linked to abiding senses of dislocation operate (Máté-Tóth 2020). Such wounds can appear in unsettling and very destructive ways, something that Russia’s invasion of Ukraine exemplifies. Shelly Rambo writes,

Some wounds do not go away. They remain invisible, operating below the surface of our lives. When and if these wounds surface, they are often unrecognizable and misunderstood. As insights about the ways in which violence affects bodies, severs social relations, and transmits across generations emerge, there is a growing need to take account of wounds and their continued impact on us ... The “post-traumatic” identifies a way of living with awareness that experiences do not respect lines between past, present, and future...

RAMBO 2017:145

This is not the hurt from centuries of prejudice, but it is hurt nonetheless, traceable to related social changes that have unsettled longstanding reassurances, and it motivates considerable portions of Christian-based right-wing populism.

At the same time, the world of social media allows ambitious politicians to mobilize these sentiments with rapidity, and often without regard to truth, whether truth means accurate depictions of the present or correct remembrances of the past. Carefully picked anecdotes can highlight episodes that
exacerbate wounded nationalisms linked to racialized or religion-based belonging: recent immigrants gaining advantage through alleged unfair access, or such groups committing crimes. Findings of science that encourage collective commitments to the common good, for example, to mitigate climate change and its effects, or address the spread of COVID-19, are also undermined.

The past, too, can be processed and manipulated in order to inflame. Historian Alison Landsberg’s notion of “prosthetic memory” identifies how technologies of mass culture, especially social media, can allow people to identify with memories that are not theirs, something she sees as a potential resource for progressive politics, as when the historically privileged grow in awareness of longstanding suffering endured by the marginalized (Landsberg 2004). Yet if some such memorializations can increase empathy and solidarity, the same process can reinforce exclusionary nationalisms as well, intensifying resentments. Those who care about Christian mission must, therefore, also address the growing number of Christians in the world – not least in my own country – who have wounds that are poorly tended, indeed are exacerbated by inflammatory signaling, many linked to toxic ways of viewing their past and potentially violent ways of acting in the present.

4.3 Responding Missiologically: Therapy and Prophylaxis

One insightful analysis that links growing religious disaffiliation and the dangerous polarization among Christians to the rise of right-wing populism comes from Byung-Chul Han in his 2020 work *The Disappearance of Rituals*. Han discerns a widespread crisis of community, shaped by social media saturation and other features of this late-capitalist moment, so that little that is meaningful holds people together. This makes many groups and individuals vulnerable to manipulation by market forces and identity-based political blandishments, generating both anomie and dangerous populisms. He believes that in the past, ritual engagement that generated shared symbolic values countered such dangerous forces. We now need other forms of social praxis to create mutual recognition, Han believes, forging interpersonal bonds anew to resist ongoing social and cultural erosion (Han 2020).

From a missional perspective facing a wounded world, one detects that those tempted to destructive populisms, and thus reinforcing polarization among Christians, find ways to blame their wounds on scapegoats: immigrants taking jobs, liberals undermining social values, religious progressives challenging treasured liturgical practice, and ethical norms, policymakers undermining professions like coal-mining in the name of alleged commitments to environmental stewardship. In an article discussing the challenges facing Christians in eastern Europe, whose historical wounds are manifold, András
Máté-Tóth diagnoses what he calls a “wounded collective identity,” noting the five profound traumas suffered by the region in the 20th century (Máté-Tóth 2020:356–358). Given such experiences, he notes how easy it is to embrace the role of victim, “playing the victim game ... a very useful method today in political discourses.” In so many of the discourses linked to right-wing populist movements, one detects this victim game, in which the aggrieved find culprits among alleged interlopers. Máté-Tóth argues, however, that “[C]hurches have another vocation regarding suffering and pain. They ought to bear witness to the grace of the merciful God given to the victim” (2020:367).

If accelerating religious disaffiliation in the global West threatens Christianity, polarization propelled by the growth of right-wing Christian populism threatens the global order itself, one reason being the difficulties it produces for any sort of concerted action to face the existential disaster forecast by climate change. In these and other ways, the three threats here discussed reinforce each other.

These are of course preliminary reflections. I hope they suggest that members of IAMs have urgent work to do. With regard to religious disaffiliation, these include discovering new ways to make Christian faith credible to those tempted to leave it – restoring the reputations of churches and religious institutions as loci of integrity, and probably also through innovative practices of re-enchantment that restore the tangibility of the transcendent in a world increasingly without current communal rituals and where social acceleration only intensifies. Such rethinking is already beginning in some missional circles (Hirsch & Nelson 2019). Those who disaffiliate from Christianity have wounds and we need to help them see that a wounded Lord is their Savior, and that Christian communities, themselves wounded, can be reliable witnesses to, and responsible participants in, that Savior’s ongoing redemption.

At the same time, with regard to right-wing Christian populisms, we need to find ways to create Christian communities less subject to flammability, less capable of being mobilized toward anger and resentment, and more grounded in honest assessments from science, history, and accurate social assessments of the present. We need missional strategies to foster believers who read the signs of the times with less vulnerability to the manipulation of the truth, past and present, so that their resentments intensify, leading them to identify scapegoats deemed guilty of causing their present wounds – groups themselves likely to become new victims. We need to help Christians move beyond what sociologist Alan Wolfe has called “the politics of petulance” (Wolfe 2018).

A great deal of missional work, therefore, needs to work on Christian communities themselves: restoring their credibility for onetime and potential believers, bridging polarization by fostering unity, creating shared experiences
of transcendence in which the God of Jesus Christ acts on our behalf. The profound erosion in social institutions is a global problem of unprecedented significance, reflective of undeniable corruption of those institutions, awareness of which is only heightened by increased transparency due to media saturation.\(^5\) Meanwhile, epistemic vices such as deliberate malevolent undermining of the truth and epistemic insouciance that is indifferent to the truth are rampant, undermining capacity for collective insight and action based on realistic assessments of the world and human responsibility (Cassam 2019). Christian communities must become communities that revere the truth.

As scholars of mission – and for some, as practitioners and supporters, too – we have our work cut out for us. Both increasing religious disaffiliation and social polarization among Christians challenge missiological reflection to foster the creation and nourishing of faith-filled communities that embrace their discipleship, all the while accepting the findings of science, resisting pernicious narratives of collective identity that demonize ethnic and religious others, and committing themselves to social and political rules that generate and protect democratic governance.

Christian mission needs to help Christians navigate their woundedness in a wounded world, reminding them that they have a wounded Savior. And mission studies should study how that has happened, is or is not happening, and how it might happen in the future.

5 Conclusion

This paper is predicated on considering mission in a wounded world. I accept that taking a self-consciously medicalized perspective on mission through prioritizing wounds risks the danger of seeming to pathologize nearly everything and everyone. As Shelly Rambo puts it, in relation to theological approaches to trauma that shape these comments, “[T]he diagnostic framing of trauma theology is not without its limitations. It is easy for theology to become subsumed under a medical model of suffering” (Rambo 2019:6). Certainly, medicine is only one of the realms for metaphors with which Saint Paul and others describe the redemption and salvation won for us in Christ. That said, affliction and healing – and thus wounds and vulnerability – constitute both central features of the heart of Christianity as well as a universal set of human experiences.

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In addition, I accept that attempts to make sense of the present and to consider right actions are limited, since circumstances change. As Kwame Anthony Appiah has written, “What we all want, and cannot have, is the ideological equivalent of a Forever stamp, the assurance that our version of enlightenment will withstand the passage of years, without requiring ungainly supplementation.” That said, I believe that among what Hans Joas has called “possible futures for Christianity” (Joas 2014), one of the most hopeful is one in which Christians are those who, knowing the wounds of their Savior, can also acknowledge their own wounds, including those that are self-inflicted. I am heartened that Pope Francis strikes the same note. In 2018, he spoke in Chile as follows:

We are not asked to ignore or hide our wounds. A church with wounds can understand the wounds of today’s world and make them her own, suffering with them, accompanying them and seeking to heal them. A wounded church does not make herself the center of things, does not believe that she is perfect, but puts at the center the one who can heal those wounds, whose name is Jesus Christ.

WOODEN 2018

References Cited


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6 Appiah (2020). “Forever Stamp” refers to the US Postal Service practice of issuing stamps without a price affixed that can guarantee delivery of a standard letter no matter how costs change over time.


### Resumen

Este artículo considera las implicaciones del tema de la 15ª Asamblea de IAMS “Poderes, desigualdades y vulnerabilidades: misión en un mundo dañado”. Describe lo que dio origen al tema, reflexiona sobre los daños y las heridas en la misión cristiana y desarrolla un marco para pensar en una misionología en función del tema, es decir, dar prioridad a la misión moldeada por su entorno de un mundo herido y marcado por poderes, desigualdades y vulnerabilidades. Luego de presentar ese marco, que incluye los términos médicos triaje, diagnóstico, terapia y profilaxis, ofrece un breve y tentativo discernimiento misionológico del momento presente, destacando, además del cambio climático, 1) la creciente desafiliación religiosa entre los que fueron cristianos y 2) la polarización y las divisiones intra-cristianas como prioridades particularmente urgentes para la interacción misional y los estudios misionológicos contemporáneos.