At the turn of the twentieth century, 70 percent of the world’s Christians were European; by 2000, that amount had fallen to 28 percent. If this trend continues for twenty-five years, Africans and Latin Americans will make up the majority of the religion’s followers.

The changing demographic has prompted Dana Robert, Truman Collins Professor of World Christianity and History of Mission at the School of Theology, to reexamine the religion’s spread and the role of missionaries who carried it across the globe.

Robert, author of *Mission: How Christianity Became a World Religion* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), acknowledges that many people simply “can’t relate to the motive” behind the work of missionaries. She cites the “very close relationship between mission and human rights discourse” as a way to make her research subject more accessible.

“One of the things I find most compelling is the way that missionaries have brought back information about people suffering around the world and have been on the cutting edge of human rights issues in the West,” she says. “It was missionaries living with indigenous people who started to defend their human rights. In the early nineteenth century, the first really strong argument against the slave trade was based on eyewitness accounts of missionaries in West Africa.”

In recent decades, she notes, missionaries have played a similar role in disseminating information about abuses in Cambodia and the Congo.

In the twenty-first century, the concept of mission continues to evolve, with an estimated 1.5 million North Americans going on so-called mission trips in 2005 — a number that includes nonreligious participants as well. “There are also people who say they’re going on mission trips, and they’re atheists,” Robert says. “There’s something that people are seeking, some kind of fundamental encounter with ‘the other.’”

The identity of missionaries is also changing. Many are non-Western, including an estimated 40,000 Indian missionaries in India. But such movement of people and ideas is hardly new. “Throughout history, when people migrated, religion spread,” says Robert. “Christianity spread along the Silk Road, from Iraq to China, in the 600s and 700s. Christianity spread in the British Empire. Whenever you allow the movement of people, their ideas and beliefs go with them.”

Sheryl Flatow