

# Things Home Mission Can Learn From Overseas Mission

Eddie Arthur 2018

*These short articles were first published on [kouya.net](http://kouya.net)*

## Introduction

Missionaries are an odd bunch; they talk about exotic places, they swap stories about suffering from strange diseases, they speak foreign languages and they are often rather out of touch with life in the UK. It's good to have them around, to listen to their encouraging and heartwarming stories, but all too often, what they say is out of touch with the reality of being a Christian in twenty-first century Britain.

OK; that's a caricature; I know that and you know that, but like all caricatures, it carries a grain of truth.

However, I believe that the skills and experience of cross-cultural missionaries are crucial to the future of the church in the UK, let me explain.

Not so long ago, Christians tended to talk about mission as something that happened overseas, while evangelism was what we did in the UK. I know there were exceptions, but the generalisation stands. The point was that we saw Britain as having an Evangelical background; there was a cultural understanding of the faith and all we had to do was call people back to beliefs that they had abandoned. What we needed was the revival of something that was there, but dormant. However, outside of the UK on "the mission field", people didn't know about Christianity at all and mission work was all about starting from scratch with a non-Christian or profoundly anti-Christian population.

I'm not convinced that things were ever quite this simple, but broadly speaking this is how we used to view things. Today, however, things have changed. There is a growing realisation in the church in the UK, that we are living in a post-Christian, multi-faith world and that we can no-longer assume that people have a basic understanding of the Christian story. Not surprisingly, we are increasingly talking about mission as something which happens in the UK as well as around the world.

This is where I think that the skills and experience of cross-cultural mission workers is important to the church in the UK. Missionaries and mission agencies have spent decades (in some cases, centuries) sharing the Gospel in situations where people are hostile to the Christian faith. They have developed skills in reaching across cultural, religious and linguistic boundaries – the same skills which are needed by the church in the UK today.

There is a wealth of knowledge and experience available out there for people in the UK to learn from; individual missionaries, mission training courses and seminars, websites and what-have-you. However, my impression is that church leaders in the UK are either unaware of what is out there or that they are unwilling to use resources produced from outside of their own constituency. This bothers me; cross-cultural missionaries have spent a couple of hundred years making mistakes and learning from them, there is no reason for the church in the UK to repeat those mistakes – they need to make their own (new) mistakes.

This post is by way of an introduction to a new series on the blog that will look at ways in which the church in the UK can learn from the experience of cross-cultural missionaries. I've no idea how long

the series will be, but when it's finished, I'll put links below to all of the post. This won't be rocket-science, but I hope it will have some practical ideas that others, who are more talented than I am can run with.

## Go

When push comes to shove, there is one basic difference between long-term, cross-cultural missionaries and the average church member. The missionary got on an aeroplane (or boat...) and went somewhere for an extended period, with a particular purpose in mind. Sure, there are lots of other differences in terms of background and experience, but they all flow out of this one decision to get up and go.

A very simple lesson can be drawn from this: if you want to reach people with the Gospel, you have to be where they are. This applies in Bingley, just as much as it does in Bangkok or Bahrain. Let me unpack this a little.

A decade or so ago, it was common to write about the difference between missional and attractional churches. The former went out to where people are, while the latter waited for people to come to them. I've overstated the definitions in order to make a point, but, in any case, I'm not sure that the distinction is a useful one. The term I think is most helpful in this context is intentionality. Missionaries are very intentional when they get on a plane to fly to the other side of the world to share the Gospel, and we need to be just as intentional in the UK context.

Christmas is coming; so let's think about how this could play out with regard to the traditional evangelistic carol service.

One approach might be to get permission to hold a service in the local pub on a Sunday evening. Carols and beer is a well known cultural tradition and as long as the venue was well chosen, you would be going to where people are. However, there is unlikely to be an opportunity for a traditional Christmas evangelistic sermon as part of the festivities. If a talk is given it will need to be well thought through and appropriately contextualised (more of this in a later post). This sort of thing could push many churches and ministers well out of their comfort zones.

Another approach would be to hold a more traditional service with a suitable sermon in the Church building or a neutral venue. This is more familiar ground, but it will only work if the congregation go out of their way to invite people to attend. This still pushes people out of their comfort zones!

The carols in the pub might seem more *missional* (or trendy) and the church-based service rather traditional. However, both can be effective, but only if there is an intentionality about making them work. A sing-song over a beer or two is all very well, but there needs to be a gospel element and a passionate gospel proclamation lacks something if the whole congregation are believers.

However we go about mission in the UK, it depends on people making intentional decisions to get out of their comfort zones, to meet people, to make relationships and to share the Gospel with them, or invite them to an event.

Some people find this easier than others, either because of circumstances or temperament, but most people struggle. The point is, that in order to effectively reach out, the whole church community has to be intentionally involved in evangelism in one way or another. It can't be left to the minister.

So what has world mission got to contribute to this?

**Stories:** people are generally motivated more by stories than by facts or argument. There are tons and tons of great stories from cross-cultural mission about ordinary people who saw God do great things through them. Mission partners or visiting missionaries can be a huge encouragement to people who are working to become intentional about home mission (more on this below). If no missionaries are available, then churches can gain a great deal from reading mission biographies together. How about studying one of Elizabeth Elliot's books?

**Mobilisation:** many mission agencies have adopted the role of mission mobiliser, a term that I roundly dislike, while really appreciating the function. The role of the mobiliser is to spend time with people, guiding them and encouraging them on their journey into world mission. It seems to me, that this function (if not a specific role) is very much needed in churches in the UK today. Most of us need encouragement as we seek to reach out to our neighbours and colleagues. We need someone to pray for us, to chivvy us along and to support us when things go slowly (as they will). We can't expect the minister to get alongside every church member in this way; so this needs to be something that happens in small groups, prayer triplets or what-have-you; but we have to be intentional about it. If mission is to be a part of our church life, then mission mobilisation needs to be part of our life, too.

A couple of thoughts in closing.

If you never accept your neighbours' or colleagues' invitations to go to the pub or to a football match, why would you expect them to accept your invitations to attend a Carol Service?

A word to missionary speakers. All too often, missionaries go to churches with the (hidden?) agenda of drumming up support or finance for themselves or their agency. In other words, a large part of their motivation is to bless themselves rather than the church they are visiting (controversial, I know). Do what you can to encourage the church in its mission at home and overseas and don't worry about the support. Your job is to make disciples wherever you go, not raise money.

## Study

When Sue and I first went to live among the Kouya and before we were allowed to start translating the New Testament, we had to demonstrate that we knew something about Kouya culture. We spent a long time chatting to people, doing some informal interviews, and taking part in village life. Eventually we gathered enough information to allow us to write some ethnographic articles about Kouya life and culture. You can find some of them [here](#), if you are interested.

Now, I am not suggesting that Brits seeking to reach other Brits with the gospel need to write ethnographic articles. However, I do think that it's important that those involved in mission in the UK spend some time thinking and learning about British culture. In truth, most of us know less about our own culture than we think we do. Let me briefly highlight a few reasons for this:

- We are living through a time when culture is changing very rapidly and it is almost impossible to keep up.
- Many Christians have limited contact with wider British culture, because they do not socialise a great deal outside of their church circles.
- Actually, very few people anywhere (not just Brits) really understand their own culture; they can explain what they do, but not why they do it.

There are various things that people involved in mission need to know.

- Demographics: how many people live in your area? What is the age profile? What is the economic profile? What immigrant populations are present and what religious background do they come from?
- What sort of social attitudes are common in the area? What newspapers do people read? Who do they vote for and why?
- What are people concerned about? Jobs? Pensions? Immigration? Why?
- What are the main topics of conversation? Football? Kids? Soap operas? Strictly?

In our training for language work we talked a lot about being participant-observers; the need to take part in local life and to observe and try to understand what was going on. If you are on mission in the UK, you need to be a participant-observer in British culture. That means meeting where people gather; the school gate or the pub say, and participating in British cultural life by, for example, watching the odd soap or reading a popular newspaper. You need to know what makes the people around you tick and why and you won't find that out if you don't share your life with them.

The first reason to know about this stuff is that it opens up the opportunity to talk to people about things that matter to them. If you have nothing in common with people, it's really hard to strike up a conversation – so learn about the stuff that matters to them. Otherwise, I realise that this doesn't sound like rocket science, but it does lay the foundation for the next few articles. There are some things you just can't do if you don't have a good understanding of the community you are trying to reach.

By the way, if you want a really good resource on understanding English culture (it applies to the other home nations to some extent, too), Kate Fox' book [Watching the English](#) is absolutely brilliant. Put it on your Christmas wish list!

So what can mission partners or mission agencies contribute to this? To be honest, beyond emphasising the need to understand communities, they probably don't have a lot to add. Mission partners who have been away from the UK for an extended time will understand British culture even less than those who live here permanently – though they possibly don't realise it. However, mission partners do have something to contribute; people who have been out of the country for a decade or so are in a good position to observe changes in society which people who are based here might miss. Don't ask your missionary friends to tell you all about British culture, but do ask them what has changed since they last lived here; they may well have noticed things that you have missed altogether.

## Contextualise

During our time living among the Kouya, I was regularly called on to preach in church – people didn't really think that Bible translation kept me busy enough. It became obvious, pretty quickly, that the way I'd learned to preach in the UK wasn't going to cut the mustard in rural Ivory Coast. The logical three-point (alliterated) sermon gave way to a more narrative form and I soon realised that I needed to be far more overt in talking about the spiritual realm – bush spirits, witchcraft etc., than I would have been in the UK (more of this in a later post).

The point is, I had to learn to contextualise. There are lots of definitions of contextualisation out there and I'll give some reading suggestions below to help those who want to know more. In this post, I want to adopt a simple definition, addressing the issues that concern people in a way that communicates to them.

Now, I realise that to some people contextualisation is a bad word, it smacks of “watering down the Gospel”. Let me say a couple of things to address this:

- Christianity is always contextualised. Always! The way in which people in the UK (of whichever church tradition) meet together, pray, sing and preach bears little resemblance to the way in which first century Christians met. The same elements may be there, but they have changed and developed over the centuries as culture has shifted.
- Paul was a master of contextualisation and we would be wise to learn from him. Just compare his sermons in Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13) and Athens (Acts 17), he adopts a completely different approach when preaching to a mainly Jewish audience and one composed of Greek philosophers.

What does contextualisation look like in the UK?

Firstly, it means we have to address the issues that concern people. How do we know what concerns them? Read yesterday's [post](#). When Paul spoke to a Jewish audience, he started off with the story of the Jewish nation, when speaking to Greeks, he worked from inscriptions on statues and Greek poetry. What are the things that concern, interest or motivate the people you are trying to reach?

Let me get a little controversial here. If your "gospel" message is simply "Jesus died on the cross so that your sins will be forgiven", you are unlikely to get much of a hearing. Yes, this message is true and people need to understand it, but there are a variety of reasons why it's probably not the right place to start, today in the UK.

Although we don't recognise it, Christians use the word "sin" in a technical sense, which is different to the way that people outside of the church use it (where it generally refers to sex). So when you talk about forgiveness of sins, your hearers are understanding something very different to what you are intending. To be honest, guilt and the need for forgiveness are not high on the agenda for most Brits; a message which offers this is not going to get a lot of traction.

Let me repeat for the easily offended; yes, people do need to be forgiven and sin is a dreadful thing – whatever people happen to think.

Loneliness, alienation, worry about children, living in an uncertain world; these are the sorts of issues that people are concerned about today and the Bible has a fair bit to say about all of them. Show how Jesus speaks into these issues and how reconciliation with God through Christ on the cross is ultimately the only lasting answer to these sorts of things. The issue of the need for forgiveness will emerge out of these sorts of discussions.

The second strand of contextualisation is that we need to address people in a way that they will hear what we say. In most British contexts the age of the half-hour long evangelistic sermon has probably passed. It's not that people can't listen for that long, it's just that they won't. Conversational forms of evangelism such as Christianity Explored and Alpha are much more effective because they engage people in a culturally appropriate way. Likewise, short, pithy talks that end with a question are far more likely to get people thinking about the message and coming back for more than long expositions which try to cover every possible angle of the gospel in one go.

There are two keys to this sort of approach. First we have to focus on the listener and what they will listen to and what they will understand. Secondly, we have to realise that mission is a long, slow business; you don't have to say everything at once, but you do want people to come back and hear more at a future date.

So what can your friendly mission partner contribute in this sort of situation? Again, I'm not convinced that most people who have lived outside of the UK for a decade or more really understand the UK culture well enough to give specific advice. But if they have learned to contextualise in

another context, they may well have a wealth of stories and advice that will help you to think through the issues that you face in the UK. Have a chat to them and find out what they did.

## Serve

When we lived in Gouabafila, I'd often spend an hour or so in the late afternoon chatting to people while cleaning up wounds of one sort or another. I treated machete wounds, abscesses, tropical ulcers and all sorts of things. I'm not medically trained, I'm just a bloke who knows a bit about first aid and who (unlike anyone else in the village) had access to basic medical supplies.

More importantly, I couldn't claim to be in the village to share the love of God through the Bible and yet ignore the suffering that was all around me. I couldn't do much about the poverty in the village, or the endemic corruption that reinforced that poverty, but I could clean out a dirty wound, treat it with antiseptic and put a clean dressing on while showing people how to treat their own wounds in future.

Since the start of the modern mission era, missionaries and mission agencies have realised that social action of some sort needs to accompany gospel proclamation. Now, huge quantities of ink have been spilled discussing whether or not social action should be classed as mission, but no serious writer denies that Christians should help the poor and needy in one way or another,

Living in a rural African village the needs around me were obvious, this may be less so in a middle-class setting in the UK (which is why we need to [study](#) the situation). However, the need to serve people is still there. Let me give three simple reasons:

- Jesus did it. He didn't just preach and teach, he healed people. If we are following in the steps of our master, we can't ignore this part of his life and work.
- If our message is that God loves people, then this will ring pretty hollow if there is no evidence that we love them, too.
- The commonest charge against Christians in the UK is that we are hypocrites – the way to disprove this is to make a positive impact on the needs of our society.

These arguments are summed up in a quote that one mission agency leader said to me during my research:

*If you just preach the word but don't do the deeds then you are not credible, if you just do the deeds without preaching the word then you are not audible.*

So what can churches do? Obviously the answer depends on the size and capacity of the church and the situation in which they find themselves, but here are a few thoughts.

Providing a location for a chat and a get together for people who might otherwise be isolated is a great way to serve. This can be in the form of lunches for retired folk or mums and toddler groups. Some churches have reached out to immigrant and refugee communities by providing English language tuition (which means investing in training for the teachers) or simply opening up the opportunity for English language conversation practice (which means investing in a kettle and some teabags).

More formally, there are schemes run by organisations such as [Christians Against Poverty](#) and [Street Pastors](#) that churches can get involved in and support.

While there is a need to integrate service and evangelism, mission agencies have made mistakes in this area and those doing mission in the UK would be wise not to repeat them.

- The term “rice Christians” refers to people who make a profession of faith simply in order to get stuff from missionaries. Now, it’s unlikely that anyone in the UK will claim to have become a Christian just so that they can ensure a supply of cheap coffee and biscuits. However, we have to avoid the impression of pressuring people to convert because we are helping them.
- The other side of the equation is that it is all too easy to concentrate on the social action side of things and to allow gospel proclamation to be sidelined. I’ve written on that [here](#).

So what can your friendly neighbourhood missionary contribute to this effort? Again, probably not much. However, if you are doing some work with refugee or immigrant communities, someone who has lived in another culture and who speaks another language or three might be a really useful person to have around. If I am anything to go by, one of the things that returned missionaries really miss is the opportunity to interact with people from other languages and cultures.

## Don’t Look Down

One of the best bits of advice that I received in my early days in Africa was that I had to learn to be “blessed by Africans”. At first, that didn’t seem to make sense; I was the person trained to be a Bible translator. It was my job to bless Africans, not the other way round. I soon learned my mistake. I had a huge amount to learn from my African friends, Christian and non-Christian alike.

The old colonial stereotype of the missionary looking down on the “natives” dies hard. Whatever the accuracy of this old image, cross-cultural missionaries have had to learn to become students of culture, to understand the underlying issues that make people act the way they do and to present Christ gently and winsomely, not from a position of arrogance and power. They have had to step down off their pedestals and meet with people on level ground – at the foot of the cross.

This is a lesson which people working in mission in the UK need to take to heart. There is a tendency in nice middle-class Christianity to look down on popular British culture in a way that would have made the average Victorian missionary blush.

My social media timelines are chock full of Christians, often clergy, railing against Daily Mail readers and Sun readers. People who watch soap operas or reality TV are stupid and those who voted for Brexit (or, more rarely, remain) are absolute idiots. No, I am not exaggerating. Why would people go to church when they see that Christian leaders hold them in contempt?

Now, before people start complaining, I am not defending the Mail and the Sun as newspapers. However, looking down on a class of people, and holding them in contempt for their reading habits, viewing habits or political views is not a tenable position for someone trying to reach out with the gospel to those same people. It has far more to do with liberal, middle-class prejudice than it has to do with Christianity.

Basically, when we condemn Mail readers, or whatever, we are saying that they are worse than us, or that we are better than them. Doing this not only shows a massive lack of self-awareness, it also shows a complete lack of understanding of the gospel itself.

The only safe ground for a missionary, to Africa or the UK, is to recognise that we are sinners in need of God’s grace just as much as the next person. We may not read the same papers or have the same political views, but we still need Jesus just as much as they do. If we have an accurate view of ourselves, we will find it impossible to look down on others.

One final remark, it is right and proper that Christians speak out against the sexism, materialism and other isms that are represented by the popular press. We might even want to suggest that people don't spend their money or waste their time on things which reinforce these values.

## Speak

When we first went to live with the Kouya, we spent the best part of two years concentrating on learning to speak the language. On an intellectual level, it was the hardest thing I've ever done in my life. Emotionally, it wasn't a bundle of laughs either, forcing yourself to go out and talk to people, knowing that you are unlikely to understand or be understood and that it is almost certain that people will laugh at you, is hard going. However, if we were going to be involved in helping to translate the New Testament into Kouya, we had to have a good knowledge of the language.

People involved in mission in England also need to speak the language of the people around them.

Before I get into what I mean by this, let me say a few things that this isn't.

- I don't mean that church leaders should try and be cool and speak like teenagers. There is nothing quite so embarrassing – don't do it.
- I am not suggesting that a minister who was brought up in Devon and now works in Newcastle should try to speak in a Geordie accent. You aren't going to fool anyone doing that!
- Nor do I mean that we should drop long *Christian words* such as justification and sanctification. People fully understand that all areas of life have technical vocabulary. You should, however, explain words like these when you use them.

Basically, all I'm suggesting is that people doing mission in England need to speak straightforward English.

Let me go back to our Kouya experience to illustrate what I mean and why I say it.

Rather embarrassingly, we became something of a tourist attraction in the village of Gouabafla. Family and friends visiting the village would come to our house to see if it was true that a white family were there and trying to learn the language. We didn't particularly enjoy being stared at, but it did give more opportunities for language practice. However, one day after a couple of years in the village, when someone expressed astonishment at the toubabous (white people) speaking Kouya, one of our neighbours spoke up and said, "they aren't toubabous, they are Kouya".

Language and identity are intimately bound together and by learning to speak the Kouya language, we had to some extent become Kouyas. I always tell language learning students that their job is not so much to learn to speak a language, but to become a member of the community of people who speak that language. Language doesn't just communicate, it also says something about who you are.

This is why I believe that native-English speakers who are working on mission in the UK need to think about language learning. It's not so much that they won't be understood, but by the use of "Christianese" they can mark themselves out as being strange. When we use the strange jargon that is part of church life, we give a message about Christians being a bit weird and different to everyone else. The messages are subtle, but human beings are finely attuned to picking up this sort of thing and reacting to it.

To a newcomer, a phrase such as "we will now enter into a time of worship" conveys far more background information about the person using it than it does about what is going to happen next in

the service. Similarly, the *mystical passive* that is part of church life (“may God’s presence be known” rather than “may you know that God is here with us”) serves as an “in-group” language and helps to exclude the visitor.

There is no real value or importance in these types of language use, it’s just the sort of thing that all groups drift into over time. However, if our desire is to draw people into our group so that they can understand the message, we need make sure that we speak in a way that doesn’t mark us out as weird. There are enough obstacles to people becoming believers, without us adding a barrier of Christianese for people to overcome.

## Religion

If you are trying to reach people from other religions with the gospel, it’s a good idea to learn from people who already have extensive experience in the field. Why go ahead and make lots of mistakes, when you can learn from the mistakes and experience of others?

A number of mission agencies with extensive experience in work among other faith communities have resources specially designed to help British churches reach out to their neighbours. Here are a few examples:

[Grace for Muslims](#) is a website maintained by Steve Bell of [Interserve](#) which seeks to educate Christians about Islam and to encourage and equip them to reach out to them with the message of Christ. On the resources page, you will find the excellent Friendship First course, which is a six week course designed to help ordinary Christians to relate to Muslims as people. It is written for Christians who have little or no knowledge of the subject and can be run in church home groups or larger seminar settings.

[Neighbours Worldwide](#) is a programme from WEC International which seeks to help churches in the UK reach out to different ethnic groups in their area. Experienced mission partners work alongside existing churches to support them in their evangelism.

[South Asia Concern](#) offers a wide range of services to churches that want to reach out to their neighbours from the Indian Sub-Continent. These include audits to see how “Asian friendly” your church is and courses and workshops aimed at equipping Christians to understand and to reach out to their Asian neighbours.

## Stories

It didn’t take me long to work out that three point sermons didn’t really work well amongst the Kouya. If I wanted people to pay attention to my preaching and to learn from it, I had to have more of a narrative shape to my sermons. I had to tell stories.

In some sections of British evangelicalism, this might be seen as close to heresy. Sermons should be well structured, logical expositions of Scripture, they shouldn’t involve story telling. Except, of course, that Jesus told lots of stories and he knew what he was doing.

One of the things that mission experience and research has shown us is that there is a significant difference between people who are primarily oral learners and those who are literate learners. This goes much deeper than a simple preference for reading over listening. Oral learners, like the Kouya have a number of distinct characteristics.

**Stories:** Oral learners prefer to learn through stories and narrative, rather than in a point by point logical presentation of information.

**Community:** Oral learners process information in community or group settings. The key question in a Bible study, is what does this passage say to *us*? Not, what does it say to *me*?

**Experience:** The act of listening to a text or to stories can often draw oral learners more deeply into the text than written learners. They experience a connection to the stories and to the story tellers that literate learners often miss.

It is important to note, that being an oral learner doesn't necessarily mean that you can't read, it just means that you have a preference for one way of processing information over another. It is estimated that over three quarters of the world's population have a preference for oral learning.

With this in mind, it is worth noting that British Evangelicalism is highly literate in the way it functions. It is assumed that people will read a lot; getting into Christian books as well as the Bible. We are taught to preach and listen to sermons which are orientated towards literate learners. Taking one of Jesus' amazingly creative parables and turning it into an alliterated, three-point, logical sermon has to be the ultimate in literate processing. As I noted above, even our group Bible studies tend to have an individualistic focus, rather than a corporate one.

The problem with this is that many of the people we are trying to reach on mission in the UK are oral, rather than literate learners. Most people in Britain do not read great amounts, they prefer to digest information in small, story-led, soundbites and shy away from long-analytical pieces. Many traditional approaches to evangelism leave people in the UK cold, not so much because of the content, but because of the way that it is presented. We have to learn to communicate with oral learners.

Thankfully, the cross-cultural mission community has produced lots and lots of resources which can be of help to people in the UK.

- [Reading the Bible With the Global Church](#): a paper by me which explores some of these issues (and more)
- [The International Orality Network](#): an affiliation of agencies and organizations working together with the common goal of making God's Word available to oral learners in culturally appropriate ways. I would particularly highlight the Lausanne book, Making Disciples of Oral Learners, which is free to download on [this page](#) (in numerous languages).
- [Scripture Engagement Website](#): this is a wonderful set of resources for anyone looking to help people get to grips with the Bible.
- [Chronological Bible Storying](#) is a way of presenting the message of the Bible in story form. [Redcliffe College](#) offer an intensive five day workshop for anyone who wants to learn to use this method.

There are numerous places where you can get hold of audio Scriptures; which are ideal for people who prefer not to read or who process information orally.

Literacy is so deeply engrained in evangelical sub-culture that many of the ideas in this post may make some people uneasy. However, it is worth remembering that for most of its history, Christianity has been transmitted orally. Mass literacy is a relatively new (and perhaps passing?) phenomenon. It's also important not to throw the baby out with the bath water. Written texts function have a permanence and a function that cannot be replaced by oral methods. There will always be a need to study the written text of the Bible; but this may not be always the best place to start in the UK, today.

## Pray

When we left our jobs to go to Bible College back in 1984 we realised that we would need people to pray for us, so we sent out our first prayer letter. The hand written letters, were soon replaced by ones produced on a manual typewriter and after a couple of years we switched to producing them on a computer and sending the printout home to be photocopied and distributed. These days, our monthly-ish news is sent out via email; I can't remember when we last did a printed letter (you can sign up at the foot of this page, if you are interested). Though the format has changed, the need for prayer has not. Missionaries need people praying for them – especially at the times when they are too tired or discouraged to pray much for themselves.

Of course, this isn't news to anyone. Church planters and those doing mission in the UK know that they need people to pray for them, because we have a God who answers prayer.

However, working among the Kouya my understanding of prayer underwent a subtle change. Listening to my Kouya brothers and sisters praying, I realised that they addressed whole areas of life that I didn't think much about. They saw spiritual causes behind diseases, they prayed against demonic powers in the bush and at work in the village and they continually prayed for protection from the work of Satan.

It would be easy – very easy – for a Western rationalist to dismiss all of this. I'm a biologist, I know what causes diseases! However, one night, when the men of the village performed a sacred mask dance in the village, we felt a sense of oppression that is hard to describe. The air seemed to grow dark and heavy and we felt ourselves in the presence of something very evil – my biology degree had no answers.

Little by little, I came to realise that my Kouya friends were aware of a spiritual reality that more or less passed me by. There are principalities and powers out there that are at war with us and we need to take them seriously.

These things may be more obvious in a pioneer situation such as among the Kouya, but they are issues in the UK, too. We need to be aware of a spiritual reality that as good, scientific Westerners we have been taught does not exist.

There are two equal and opposite mistakes that we can make. Firstly, we can ignore the spiritual realm altogether. We can see life in terms of cause and effect. Ultimately, this reduces mission to a series of techniques; do the right things and you'll get the right results. The other mistake is to see a demon under every bush and spend all of our time naming, rebuking and rejecting various powers. There are plenty of books out there that take this approach.

CS Lewis caught this dichotomy in the Screwtape Letters when he wrote:

*There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors and hail a materialist or a magician with the same delight.*

There is a fine line to tread here; but people involved in mission in the UK must not ignore the reality of spiritual warfare. When a minister or church planter is beset by huge number of debilitating problems all at once; there may well be more at play than blind coincidence. When people are

extremely resistant to the gospel message, it is probably more than just an intellectual refusal to assent to what they have heard.

Of course, we also need to be aware of the work of God's Spirit; he is the one who convicts people and draws them to Christ and we need to pray for his involvement in our lives and the lives of those we are seeking to reach. And the good news, is that the powers of hell were defeated at the cross. They are fighting a rearguard action, awaiting their ultimate defeat when Christ returns – but rearguard actions can cause real damage and real hurt and we need to take them seriously.