QUESTIONS 6: WHAT ON EARTH IS A MISSIONARY?

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There is no hard and fast definition of what constitutes a missionary, but here are four qualities that are part of the whole.
Category: Observations

At first glance, this might seem like a silly question, with an obvious answer; *a missionary is someone who travels to a new country or culture to share the gospel.Â* Well, that definition is ok as far as it goes, but what about medical missionaries, or people who go to far flung places to provide logistic and administrative support for church planters - are they missionaries? Or consider those who work with unreached people groups in their home town: are they missionaries? Are the home staff of mission agencies missionaries?

The thing is that mission is a complex business there are lots of people doing all sorts of different things all round the world and all sorts of different ways in which they receive their funding. It is far from simple to come up with a one line definition of what a missionary is. Nor, in this case, is the Bible much help. Though I would argue that mission is a biblical concept, the specific terms mission and missionary are never actually used in their modern sense. It would be nice if you could look up "missionary" in a concordance and turn up six verses which describe what one looks like, but you can't.

In the end, I would argue that missionary is actually a fuzzy concept which can't be given a hard and fast definition. There are no strict dividing lines which say that one Christian worker is a missionary and another isn't. However, I would argue that there are four qualities that need to be present in one way or another for someone to be called a missionary. I realise that there won't be universal agreement on this, but, that is the nature of the beast.

Missionaries are sent out by churches: In order for someone to be regarded as a missionary, they need to have been comissioned into ministry by a church fellowship. This may be a very simple process, but it is an important one. People are not missionaries on the basis of an individual, personal decision, but on the grounds of their gifts and calling being recognised by their church. Even when there is a mission agency involved in the process, the mutual responsibility between missionary and sending fellowship is the key relationship.

Missionaries are involved in disciple-making and witnessing to Jesus: any mission work must overtly point people to Jesus and deliberately seek to make disciples (see this post). There are lots of good stuff that people can do, which is well worthwhile; relief of poverty, education and so on, but if there is no active and deliberate witness to Jesus, it isn't mission. This doesn't mean that every missionary needs to be involved full time in disciple making or church planting. The administrator who keeps things ticking over so that the church planters can do their stuff is as much a missionary as those who are preaching and teaching. Missionaries work in teams and the team members have different roles - but the job of the team is to point people to Jesus.

Missionaries have a vocation and a long-term commitment: I am somewhat allergic to much of the talk about a missionary call, but some sense of vocation is essential for someone to be called a missionary. How Â this sense of vocation is experienced is less of an issue, there is no recipe. Mission work involves a long-term commitment to a ministry - often in the face of danger, disease or home-

sickness. Being a missionary is not like another job and it is not a step on a career ladder in the Christian industrial-ministry machine. It is about devoting your life to making Jesus known.

Missionaries don't always receive a salary: this is a complex one. Some people who would count as missionaries do receive a regular stipend or salary, but many don't. "Living by faith" (as the jargon has it) is not a sign of sanctification or a special relationship with God. However, if someone is willing to travel off around the world (or even stay at home) without the promise of a regular salary, I believe that it is more likely that they fulfil the other criteria that I've laid out.

These four points are indications; they are not hard and fast guidelines or a checklist that sets out to define who and what a missionary is. There are people who would not fit into one or more of these descriptions, but who are most definitely missionaries. This is especially true of people from the growing majority world church who have not inherited all of the structures and baggage that goes along with mission from the West. However, I also think that my list does (intentionally?) exclude many people in the West who move from job to job in Christian organisations, using their skills for good, but without a long-term commitment to anything in particular. The Christian job market is a very safe and comfortable place for some people, but being employed by a mission agency doesn't make you a missionary.

Does this matter? Yes, I think it does, for two reasons. Firstly, if we throw the term missionary around too liberally, we end up losing the focus on making disciples and planting churches. Secondly, churches need to think through how they will support world mission and a consideration of what they consider a missionary to be is an important part of this process.

Oh, one last thing - I never mentioned geography in my list.

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