QUESTIONS 8: INDIGENOUS MISSIONS

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Some thoughts about churches supporting missionaries in other countries, rather than sending Brits overseas.
Category: Observations

In view of my last post in this series about the cost of supporting British missionaries, some might be inclined to ask whether or not we should focus on supporting indigenous missionaries (sorry, I can't think of a better term, this early on a Monday morning) in their own country rather than sending Brits.

As always, there is no easy answer to this question, but here goes anyway.

Firstly, as a principle, I believe that the church - locally and worldwide - should be interdependent; we have a duty to help one another. Churches in the west should help those in other parts of the world and vice-versa. This help could be given in the form of support for indigenous missionaries working in their own or neighbouring countries. Essentially, the concept is a good one. Obviously, the circumstances will vary from congregation to congregation, but some churches in the UK should undoubtedly support indigenous missionaries.

That being said, I there are a few issues that I'd want to raise:

Financial support is a blunt tool: you need to be careful that your provision of finance doesn't drift into a situation where you are controlling or micro-managing the missionary at a distance. This needs to be carefully thought through and there probably needs to be some strong relationships or good administrative processes in place to stop the person playing the piper calling the tune.

Don't get taken for a ride: this is the other side of the coin. There are lots of stories of missionaries (from all backgrounds) making dramatic claims about the success of their ministry, which independent observers could simply not back up. Unfortunately, there are people out there, claiming to be missionaries, who know how to tug the purse-strings of Western Christians and you need to avoid them. Of course, we have people in the West who are experts at extorting money from Christians, too - this is a universal problem. But when people are at one degree of remove, it can be harder to know what is going on.

Check your motivations: a number of organisations build their profile on the idea that we should support indigenous missionaries because they are more cost-effective than Western missionaries. Now, this is certainly true and it is important to show proper stewardship of our money, but I'm still very uneasy about this concept. Let me rephrase it and you might see why I'm not entirely happy.Â *We should employ brown people because we don't have to pay them as much as white ones.* Get my point? I am very uneasy about the concept of validating mission work and mission workers on financial terms alone.

Check your attitudes: would you allow the missionary that you are supporting to preach in your own church? If not, why are you supporting them? Let's face it if they are equipped to preach and teach in places where the church is vibrant and growing or where it is suffering and struggling, they probably have something to contribute to our situation where the church is comfortable and sleepy. Unless our attitudes are wrong that is.

Just a few further thoughts in closing. Firstly, I don't believe that the growth in missionaries around

the world means that there is no place for missionaries from the UK. It is not simply an either/or, it is a both/and. Christians in the UK have something to contribute to the church around the world and (more importantly?) the church in the UK has things to learn through its involvement in sending and supporting missionaries. Secondly, can I suggest that if a church wants to support missionaries from another part of the world, they might help them to come to the UK? It's not likely to be cheap (see above), but an influx of evangelists from other parts of the world would do the UK and the British church a lot of good. A final thought, the Global Connections document on church to church partnerships has a lot of good stuff to say on this issue.

In passing, I've not put an appropriate header image on this post because when I Googled "African missionaries", all I got was pictures of white people! Search engines help to maintain stereotypes that are neither accurate nor helpful. /rantover

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