MISSION AND MILLENNIALS: THE MENTOR

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This is where I see a vital role for the mission agency to play: itâ€™s not about mobilising resources; perhaps not even so much about care and support; itâ€™s really to do with training, reorienting ourselves, and the necessary context for learning and reflection.
Category: Observations

When you look at online interaction between â€˜professional missionariesâ€™ (which is what I am), you see a lot of concern for missionary resilience and self-care, and a desire to improve the process of sending and supporting missionaries. A lot of missionaries have apparently been missing out on good supports and are perhaps now trying to jerry-rig their own. I often find myself singing the praises of our organisationâ€™s support structures and pastoral care plan.

However my sense is that this concern has been edging out a more fundamental discussion to be had regarding missiology. What are we actually doing, and why, and how? Unless we (speaking as a wealthy, middle class Anglo Australian) grapple with this, weâ€™ll be propping up the status quo when missionariesâ€™ roles and even self-identity may be out of kilter with the times.

Iâ€™m thinking especially of the wider context of the global church that we are called to work with. The Protestant missionary movement helped give birth to it, but today, generations on, the majority world churches have come into their own. This is not a particularly new development: it was more than 40 years ago when Kenyan minister John Gatu asked everyone to hit pause on Western missionaries in order to give African churches a chance to grow into their own identity.

Many missionaries today lean on their personal sense of calling to â€˜missionsâ€™. Also prevalent is the appeal to â€˜missionaryâ€™ as an open-ended, catch-all title. Combined, these two things can have the effect of conferring significance on whatever we turn our hand to, while sheltering us from the question of its appropriateness. A mission agency is a vital avenue for testing these things, and helping us to recognise the ecclesial call, the calling of the wider Body of Christ. These are not things local churches have been adept at. I wonder if there is a particular challenge here for American Christianity, where local churches doing â€˜direct sendingâ€™ appears to be a common model.

Some local churches have now made â€˜missionâ€™ a matter of the local neighbourhood, or the nation. Others may be setting their sights further afield, but have misconceptions about what cross-cultural ministry entails. In either case, pastors are probably ill-equipped to connect people with the wider world. Local churches need to get a sense of the global churchâ€”and mission agencies are in a good position to intentionally facilitate this. When local churches enthuse about outreach or growth, the onus is on the mission agency not simply to cheer them on, but to lift their horizons.

There are trends in ministry today that ask for critical reflection. An emphasis on church planting can risk reducing the task to self-replication. But isnâ€™t it possible to have an indigenous faith thatâ€™s not beholden to Western forms? Meanwhile, an emphasis on disciple making can risk

reducing the task to multiplication. But what makes a disciple, and what is a disciple made of? What after all is the purpose of these new-creation fellowships, these strange new-birth families giving loyalty to a different lord? What should they look like in todayâ€™s entangled, urbanised, globalised world, a world facing planetary strife as never before? How can they face the powers of Babylon that seem as potent and ruthless as ever? Revival will manifest prophetic, embodied, communal answers to these questions, something more profound than ever-expanding networks of churches and fresh harvests of believers. Bigger is not always better.

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Even when there is massive disillusionment with the missionary enterprise, as we are seeing with the #exvangelical watershed in America, our missionary inclinations may reemerge in other forms. Thereâ€™s plenty of activity in the international development industry, as well as fresh attention being given to troubleshooting justice issues such as human trafficking. These good endeavours may be more ethical, more accountable or more professional than our experience of â€˜missionsâ€™, yet they are still premised on â€˜helpingâ€™. The old mission paradigm has morphed, but still puts ourselves in the driverâ€™s seat as the ones with the solutions and the prerogative to bring change. Mission agencies are well placed to help us face up to our self-importance and to start honouring the global church we now belong to.

All these are missiological issues. Mission agencies have their own challenges, but they are also best placed to push back against the problems by revealing the presence of Christ in His global church and bringing a self-critical eye to the missionary enterprise. This has been our experience in CMS Australia.

One thing I appreciate about CMS Australia is that itâ€™s characterised by an ethos more than a specific method or area of ministry. Its traditional Venn-inspired emphasis on long-term service (say, ten years or more in one location), going deep with language and culture, and honouring indigeneity, now seems more pertinent than ever (we talk about it in terms of â€˜vulnerable missionâ€™). This ethos opens up dynamism and collaboration. It also enables us to look beyond the default for Westerners, namely teaching and leadership roles, or establishing our own platforms (admittedly this may be pretty new territory).

Unpacking this in a mission agency will mean renewing the way we see partnership. It is no longer reasonable to expect people to follow the mission agency and its entire raft of workers and

ministries, or to come on board for the generic cause of world mission. The good news is that there is now a range of potential relationships beyond â€˜memberâ€™ or â€˜link churchâ€™. Of course the challenge is to overcome our habit of addressing ourselves purely to those traditional stakeholders, but the prospect of doing so is a wonderful opportunity. It is not hard to imagine mission agencies serving as intercultural trainers and consultants for the wider church. Rather than merely attempting to direct churchesâ€™ attention to ministry abroad, mission agencies can be beacons of true togetherness in the midst of our interconnected and fragmented world.

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