BEING COMPLETELY THERE

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A commitment to taking the gospel to the ends of the earth will involve you in sacrifice. Yes, there will be good bits, but much of it will be hard.

Category: Observations

I've had an interesting set of responses to my post on Covid-19 and the missionary call, from last week. Some people picked up on the theme of how the experience of cross-cultural mission has helped them deal with the lockdown. There was a comment on the initial post and another reader pointed me to this helpful Facebook post.

However, it was Mark Pickett who picked up on a thought that I'd like to expand on.

https://twitter.com/DrMarkPickett/status/1278288003744530432?s=20

This importance of "fully embracing your new context" was picked up on by experienced missionary theologian, Karl Dahlfred:

https://twitter.com/dahlfred/status/1278324304812347392?s=20

Prompted by Mark, Karl then expanded his thoughts into a thread:

https://twitter.com/dahlfred/status/1278402967905984512

https://twitter.com/dahlfred/status/1278403496241397760

https://twitter.com/dahlfred/status/1278404408141844485

https://twitter.com/dahlfred/status/1278405002319532034

The Twitter discussion carried on, and you can follow it by clicking on one of the tweets quoted above.

I very much agree with the points that Karl makes in his Twitter thread and a blog post which he subsequently wrote on the subject, but I'd like to add a few thoughts of my own.

The first thing that I'd say is that I've long been concerned about the way in which computers can prevent long-term missionaries integrating into the society that they are sent to work with. I lectured on this back in the early 90s, long before the Internet became a thing. In those days, my concern was that it was too easy to convince yourself that you had to do some important work on the computer (or play games) and that this could distract you from making contacts with people. I had faced those temptations myself.

The second thing that I'd add is that the balance between missionaries embedding themselves in the host culture and spending time "at home" via Zoom, Skype or whatever is a difficult one. When we first went to Africa, we didn't return to the UK for two and a half years and contact with home was via airmail letters. This became a problem when our Sam was born and it was impossible to get the news home for about a week - and even then we had to get a friend to call our parents. The occasional Zoom call might have been a great help at times during those years. However, even if the missionary wants to limit their time online, as Karl suggests they should, there is likely to be huge pressure from family (especially parents/grandparents) for regular contact with home. The missionaries' parents have not signed up to learn a new language and culture (and they may be completely opposed to their kids going overseas) and they, understandably, want to see their grandkids on the screen. The call to balance ministry imperatives with the commandment to honour our father and mother is a delicate one and we have to see both sides of the equation.

However, there is a deeper, systemic issue that I think also needs to be addressed. Karl points towards it when he talks about the need for field orientation and management to address these issues. This would be a start. We were required to fulfil certain requirements including attaining a decent level of competence in Kouya and writing a number of papers on Kouya culture before we could start translation. This certainly helped to concentrate the mind. However, I believe that there is an underlying culture change needed in the missions movement if we are truly to grasp the challenge of long-term engagement.

The temptation to be "at home" while being away from home is increasing with the ubiquity and ease of social media and video communication. However, I believe that the missions movement as a whole has underlying problems which predate these issues. I'd like to briefly highlight three of them:

- **Short-Term Mission**. Many agencies have placed a massive emphasis on short-term mission trips and they have unwittingly given the impression that a long-term commitment to people, to their language and to their culture, is an optional extra in mission. It isn't! There is a place for short-term mission trips, but they should not be the norm and they should only exist within the framework of a committed engagement to a situation.
- **Language Learning**. Many agencies have reduced their commitment to language. It is not unusual for missionaries to be given a few months or even less to learn the language that they will be ministering in. This might just about work if the language is closely related to their own language and if they have had some background in it beforehand, but otherwise, it's just a joke. If you do not understand the language that people speak around you, if you can't participate in jokes and social chit-chat, you will never really fit into a culture. By shortening the time that candidates can spend learning languages, mission agencies are ensuring that they will never

integrate into their situation.

- **Sacrifice**. This is an old word that used to be a common one in mission literature, but it has rather fallen out of fashion of late. In order to increase recruitment, agencies have tended to focus on the positive sides of missioanry living. Mobilisation literature is full of pictures of shiny happy people having fun, and fewer photos of homesick people desperately trying to communicate with local people while fighting off a malaria headache. A commitment to taking the gospel to the ends of the earth will involve you in sacrifice. Yes, there will be good bits, but much of it will be hard. Part of that sacrifice is putting aside your goals to achieve stuff in ministry and your desire to talk to your family at home so that you can acquire enough language, culture and friendships to have a long-term impact. As long as our recruitment ignores the tough side of mission life, we will struggle to get people to embrace it when they need to. (See more on this theme here.)