THE END OF MISSION AS WE KNOW IT?

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Category: Observations

There have been some interesting responses to my recent couple of posts on mission and presence (here and here). I'd like to highlight one in particular which comes from my friend Jay Matenga.

https://twitter.com/jay_matenga/status/1280074684839559170

Jay is the head honcho of the World Evangelical Alliance Missions' Commission, so he should know a thing or two and is always worth listening to.

Jay highlights two issues in this tweet and I'd like to take them in turn. The first is the likelihood that expat missionaries as we know them will have less of a role to play in the future.

I think, with a few qualifications, Jay is right here. As the world fractures into competing blocks, travel and visa restrictions are going to increase. Cultural and ideological barriers will also start to spring up; there will be parts of the world where sexist, homophobic and transphobic evangelicals (as they are perceived) will simply not be welcome. The openings for missionaries from the West to be openly involved in evangelism and disciple-making around the world will decrease. Short-term mission trips and the pattern of field-service and furlough/home-assignment will become far harder to maintain in the future than it is today. It is impossible to predict the extent of these restrictions, but mission agencies need to be thinking about it now.

That being said, I believe that, for the foreseeable future, Western expertise in medicine, agriculture, education and similar fields are still likely to be valued around the world. This will continue to allow mission agencies the opportunity to work in places where they would otherwise not be able to work. Mission agencies have been good at creatively integrating various forms of disciple making into social action projects and, to be frank, governments have often been prepared to turn a blind eye to these sorts of things, knowing full well that they were happening.

The point is, if they are to continue into the mid to long-term, mission agencies are going to have to get much more creative about what they are doing. They are also, almost certainly, going to see a significant reduction in the number of missionaries that they can send.

Jay's second point is "What if missions now require migration?". I think the point here is that the spread of Christianity has always relied on migration in one form or another. This happens either through "Christian" populations migrating to other places or by people migrating into areas where they encounter the gospel for the first time. The problem is when we look at church history, we focus on the "big names", rather than on the movements of everyday Christians. This gives us the

impression that the spread of Christianity has always relied on "professionals". Likewise, the modern mission movement has, for a variety of reasons, highlighted the work of missionaries, while downplaying the role of everyday Christians.

A good example of this comes from the church in London. Over the last twenty years or so, new life has been breathed into the capital. New churches have been planted and influential Christian leaders have appeared on the scene, all led by diaspora Christians from Africa and the Caribbean. These aren't seen as missionaries, but they have had a huge impact on Christianity in the UK. Another example would be Philippine remittance workers around the world. They emigrate for years at a time to earn money to send to their families at home; many of these people are Christians who take the gospel with them, often to places that are very hostile to the notion of Christianity or missionary work.

While I agree with Jay's central point, I would phrase things differently. I think that the spread of Christianity requires (and always has required) migration. However, I'm not convinced that the spread of Christianity and "missions" is the same thing.

Christianity has always spread organically through movements of people. The "professional" mission movement has been a catalyst to the spread of the faith, but it has only ever been a part of a much larger whole. I write about mission agencies because that is my world, my calling and (dare I say it?) my expertise. However, I have always recognised that these are just a small part of what God is doing in the world today.

What I believe that Jay is highlighting is that the natural organic spread of the church will come much more into focus in the future as restrictions are placed in the way of the missions movement. One interesting question that is raised by Jay's comment is whether westerners who might have served as traditional missionaries will join in with what God is doing by becoming part of the global Christian diaspora.