MISSION FUTURES

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Over the years, I've attended numerous international missions' conferences, some of which were very helpful, and some less so. There are a couple of things that these conferences have in common; they are very expensive to run and they all involve a lot of air travel. Neither of which are ideal.
Category: Observations

Let's face it, no one thinks that Zoom calls are an ideal substitute for face to face meetings. Zoom works pretty well for small groups, but once the number go over ten or so, they become unwieldily and when you get to the point where you have to scroll through multiple screens to see all the attendees they become very inefficient. You can use Zoom as an online venue to replace large, multi-day conferences, but there are a lot of problems. Perhaps most importantly, you don't get the opportunity for personal meetings over meals (though breakfast work meetings are an abomination), chats over coffee and what have you.

Zoom conferences have some significant problems.

However, what we don't always recognise is that face to face conferences have problems, too. And this is particularly true in the mission world. International conferences, congresses and meetings are very much a part of the evangelical mission scene. Coordinating bodies such as the World Evangelical Alliance Missions Commission or the Lausanne Movement organise meetings which can be huge, drawing in delegates from around the globe. Likewise, mission agencies tend to coordinate their work and plan for the future at delegate conferences which can include hundreds of people meeting in a hotel somewhere. Over the years, I've attended numerous international missions' conferences, some of which were very helpful, and some less so. There are a couple of things that these conferences have in common; they are very expensive to run and they all involve a lot of air travel. Neither of which are ideal.

The cost of these conferences is a problem in a number of ways. Firstly, it gives the impression that mission can only proceed when there are lots of financial resources to splash around, something which couldn't be further from the truth. It also privileges those who have money over those who don't. There is a small cadre of "conference professionals" who seem to do nothing but travel from one conference to another (I'm probably being unfair here), when others who might benefit more are unable to attend.

Regarding the air travel thing, I find nothing more ironic that a load of people jetting into some far flung place to discuss the place of creation care in God's mission.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that international missions conferences shouldn't happen. They have had an important role to play over the past 150 years and there may still be a place for them. However, I'm not convinced that we need as many of them as we have got used to. In a post-covid world, where travel is likely to be much more expensive and far less convenient (not to mention restrictions on mass gatherings indoors) we are going to have to get used to doing business

differently.

Fortunately, over the last few months organisations have started to learn how to host large scale gatherings over Zoom and other online tools. As I mentioned at the start, there are significant disadvantages to this sort of interaction, however these are probably outweighed by the disadvantages of face-to-face meetings. The future undoubtedly involves some sort of compromise between the two, but the age of frequent international missions' conferences is probably over and that may be no bad thing.

As I write this, Sue is getting ready to start working with a translation team thousands of miles away. Due to lockdown restrictions, the three team members are all in different locations in their country. Using a combination of WhatsApp and collaborative translation software, Sue will work with the team to help them check the quality of their translation of Luke's Gospel. Is this is good as working face-to-face? No. Then again, Sue hasn't had to fly halfway around the globe and spend weeks away from home. It's a compromise, but a workable one.

Lots more compromises like this are going to be needed in the future.