THE FUTURE OF MISSIONS 1

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Considering the relevance of a US report into the future of mission for the situation in the UK
Category: Observations

The Barna research organisation has recently published a report on the future of missions which you can buy here. However, rather than splashing out your hard-earned cash, you can read discussion about the report from a US perspective at the Life Overseas blog - the first article is here. Alternatively, you could just hang around here for the next two days.

In today's post, I'm going to look at the extent to which the report's findings translate to the UK situation. In the next post, I'll to pull some quotes from the report and comment on them. Finally, I'm going to consider the report as a whole and discuss the underlying premises and methodology. Spoiler alert: I think the report is very badly flawed indeed.

So let's start with a look at some of the report's conclusions and consider them in the British situation. In the absence of a list of conclusions in the report itself, I'm going to steal the list from A Life Overseas. It should be noted that my comments on the British situation are, for the most part, impressionistic. There isn't the same hard research available to back up the comments.

> *One-fourth of engaged Christians aged 18 to 34 is a â€œsupportive skeptic.â€ They have given to missions, volunteer in their church, and believe that â€œsharing the Gospel with non-Christiansâ€ is an important part of the work. But they have concerns. They either believe missions creates unhealthy dependency, missions was too linked with colonialism in the past, missions hurts the local economy, or missions needs to repair its reputation. This group also includes a large percentage of minorities.*

Barna's reports are always good at classifying people into groups like this. My impression is that the proportions of people who could be called supportive sceptics would be higher in the UK. I would also suspect that you would find a significant number of supportive sceptics in other age groups, too, over here. One way in which this is demonstrated in the UK is in the way that focus of the term mission in the UK has often shifted from a world-wide one to a more narrow, UK based one.

> *One in three of young adult Christians believe â€œin the past, missions work has been unethical.â€ Just one-fourth of adults 35 and older agree with that statement.*

Given the post-colonial guilt that the UK still feels and the drip of negative coverage of religious organisations in the UK press, I would be very surprised if this were not significantly higher over here.

> *Christians of all ages strongly prefer the term â€œsharing faithâ€ over terms like â€œconvert,â€ â€œevangelism,â€ â€œmaking disciplesâ€ and â€œwinning souls.â€ Â*

I suspect that the language choices might vary slightly, but certainly more overt terms are used less here. I don't know when I last heard someone talk about "winning souls". In a post a couple of days ago, I quoted Martin Lee as saying: *"Have we become too careful in our use of words? I would contend that some agencies, still committed to proclamation and integral mission â€“ and practising it â€“ have become too shy about saying they do."*

> *Aid edges out evangelism for its importance in missions in some of the survey results among the more skeptical of younger Christians.*

If you look at the way in which British Christians spend their money on mission work, this is undoubtedly true across the board in the UK. You can download a detailed report which looks at this here.

> *â€œShow Godâ€™s loveâ€ is the top responsibility missionaries should do, most young Christians say.*

Errr yes....

> *Younger Christians are more likely (29 percent) than older Christians (23 percent) to believe that the role of missionary is similar to â€œsomeone else who does work to fight poverty and injustice,â€ showing their strong value of social justice work.Â*

Looking at the profile of some agencies in the UK, there is a blurring of that which is specifically Christian and the more general aid and justice movement. However, there seems to be little push-back from the British Christian public, which seems to indicate that we are happy with this.

> *Short-term missions, accountability, and traditional fund-raising models were some things*

> *younger Christians would change. Business-as-missions models also raised some concerns. The concern of â€œTent-fakingâ€ was mentioned in interviews, for instance.Â*

The model for funding missionaries in the US is slightly different to the one in the UK. Here, there is a greater emphasis on the role of the "sending church". That being said, there is a general move to reconsider the way in which mission work is funded and the respective roles of the church and the agency. I also suspect that economic and legal considerations (the employment status of "supported" missionaries is likely to come under the scrutiny of HMRC) will lead to changes sooner rather than later.

> *Younger Christians are less likely (50 percent) to pray for missionaries in the future than older Christians (63 percent).*

I'm not entirely convinced by this as a generalisation for the UK context. Things are undoubtedly changing here and traditional church prayer meetings and missionary prayer letters are not the focus that they once were. However, movements such as 24-7 Prayer are having a significant impact. It's also true (and the report highlights this) that younger people are likely to be highly committed to praying for and supporting their friends who are involved in mission work.