THE FUTURE OF MISSIONS 3

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If we are to play a relevant part in what God is doing in the world, we have to start thinking far more radically than we are doing and we have to start listening to others, not just to ourselves.
Category: Observations

This is the third in my series of posts about the Barna report on the future of missions. In this post, I will suggest that the report is seriously flawed and based on a false premise. However, before getting into the report, we need to deal with a question of terminology.

The report uses the term "missions", whereas I almost always use the singular form "mission". There are some writers who distinguish between the singular and plural and it is necessary to understand this distinction (even though it is one that I don't make) in order to follow where I am going. Goheen, following Lesslie Newbiggin says:

> *Whereas mission is the total calling of the church to make known the gospel as it participates in God's mission, missions are particular enterprises within that total mission of the church "which have the primary intention of bringing into existence a Christian presence in a milieu where previously there was no such presence or where such a presence was ineffective".*
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> *Introducing Christian Mission Today p.85*

In this view, missions is a subset of mission and focusses on specific activities. The Barna report describes itself as a report on the "future of missions" and it is clear that it is very activity focussed. More specifically (though it never says so) it actually deals with the future of North American missions. That being said, Newbiggin's definition of missions is stretched somewhat as not all of the activities envisaged in the report aim to bring "into existence a Christian presence...".

If missions is a part, but not the whole of mission, any discussion of the future of mission must be carried out in the light of what is happening in God's broader mission. Missions cannot go its own way. The lack of any serious consideration of what is happening in mission is a serious flaw at the heart of this report that means that any conclusions it draws are of limited usefulness. There is virtually no mention of Scripture (beyond cursory references to the Great Commission) and there is no attempt to seriously engage in what God is doing in the majority world or with the mission (and missions) movements which are springing up across the globe. Essentially, the future of missions is presented as being defined by the views of a sample of Christians from North America. Now, these views are important and they need to be taken into account, but they should be far from the whole story. With those thoughts in mind, I'd like to highlight some of the problems which emerge in the report due to its lack of an appropriate foundation.

It is essentially self-referential. Chapter one is entitled what do people value about missions?

However, the range of people who are questioned is extremely narrow. The nature of international missions is that they are - well - international. If you want to know about what people value about them in order to consider what their future is, then you need an international sample. At one point, the chapter criticises the "white saviour" image of missionaries. However, defining the future of missions without any input from the wider world, this report is a classic example of how that stereotype emerges.

At one point the report says "Do we believe our way of doing this is or should be 'the norm'? We must be willing to look in the mirror and address issues of power and control and then make room for others." I heartily endorse this sentiment, but I see no evidence for it being applied in the report. Asking the people who support and send missionaries what the future of mission should be is not addressing issues of power and control.

There is a distressing lack of accountability. Chapter 6 asks the question What Should Accountability Look Like for Mission Work? This is an important question and it's good that they asked it. Unfortunately, they only considered one dimension of accountability; towards supporters in North America. Missionaries must be accountable to the people that they work with and for, too. Not only that, but if there is a conflict of interest between the needs for accountability to the field and to the donors at home, the field should win out.

There is a failure of imagination. Chapter 7 asks whether there is a place for a new kind of missionary? Unfortunately, there is no discussion about new kinds of missionaries, they just discuss the same old type of missionary operating on a different funding model. Any serious engagement with new types of missionaries in North America needs to get to grips with the significant number of Latinos and Africans who are coming to the US and planting churches in areas untouched by the existing church. That's different!

At this point, you may think that I am being hyper-critical. The report is written by and for North Americans, and it reflects their worldview and I should read it in that manner. The thing is, the church (and its missionary expression in particular) is an international body. Mission is polycentric, it is not just about people going from the West as they always have done. There are new expressions of mission, new methodologies and structures and they will continue to spring up whether we in the West notice them or not. If we, in Europe and North America, are to play our part in what God is doing in the world today, we must do so in dialogue with our brothers and sisters around the world. The future of missions will not be determined in our part of the world alone.

We face a danger. There is enough goodwill and certainly enough money in missions from Europe

and (especially) North America to allow us to keep going on as we have always done. We can decide the strategies for mission around the globe according to the desires of our own constituency at home without reference to others. However, if we do this (and that is essentially where this report is headed) we risk becoming increasingly irrelevant. Our model of mission, driven by the West, will be sidelined and that would be a tragedy for the world church, but particularly for us.

If we are to play a relevant part in what God is doing in the world, we have to start thinking far more radically than we are doing and we have to start listening to others, not just to ourselves.