WHERE THERE IS NO COVID

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Tanzania's reaction to coronavirus vaccinations is symptomatic of a bigger issue which has huge implications for world mission.
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There are a number of countries which have officially recorded no cases of coronavirus, including North Korea and Turkmenistan. Despite recording no official cases of the disease, both of these countries will be receiving vaccinations when they become available. However, there is one country which stands out as truly special, not only has Tanzania recorded no cases of covid-19 since June, the country has also rejected the need for vaccination. The Tanzanian health minister has suggested that a vegetable smoothie is all that is needed to protect people from the virus.

You can read more about this story on the BBC website.

Now, I don't want to get into the broader issues of the importance of vaccinations and the nature of viral pandemics, there are plenty of other places to go and read about these questions. I'd like to briefly consider the relevance of Tanzania's stance for world mission.

John Magufuli, the President of Tanzania has long presented himself as an opponent of western imperialism and what he has to say about the vaccines is instructive:

> *"If the white man was able to come up with vaccinations, he should have found a vaccination for Aids, cancer and TB by now,"*

Basically, he is saying, don't trust "the white man". Friends and colleagues working in other parts of Africa have mentioned that these sorts of sentiments about the covid vaccinations are quite common in some circles. The conspiracy theories about vaccinations being a shadowy plot to control people that we hear in the West are amplified in Africa with a general suspicion of the motives of western governments and companies. After all, we have given Africans good reason to be suspicious about us over the last few hundred years.

So what has this to do with mission? Simply, we need to realise that white missionaries presenting a Jesus who is wrapped up in the trappings of Western society and culture are not what Africa needs. This has always been the case, but Africans have usually been too polite and welcoming to tell us.

President Magufuli's suspicion of the west is not new and it is not due to coronavirus. All that covid has done is highlight issues and divisions which already existed and accelerated their spread.

The relative incompetence of a number of western governments (I'm looking at you, UK and USA) in dealing with the pandemic is another issue that has bubbled to the surface. We've lived through a century or so where Europe and the United States have been the dominant forces in the world economically and culturally. World mission was able to ride on the coat-tails of this dominance. However, the world is changing and our response to coronavirus is a symptom of that change. We are not as competent as we had told the world we are.

In the post-covid world, western missionaries and western mission agencies will need to work much harder to develop an appropriate humility. We cannot assume that we will take the leadership or that our issues, theologies and view of the church are the ones that everyone else needs to share. Changes in attitudes and relationships that might have taken a couple of decades to work through are going to have to be worked through in a very short timescale.

Thankfully, however we react, the Lord will continue to build his church. It doesn't all depend on us.