THE ONLY WAY IS ETHICS

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Category: Observations

Jackson Wu, the author of Reading Romans With Eastern Eyes, has recently posted a rather sad post about why he has left the Southern Baptist Convention and the associated International Mission Board.

Let me hasten to add that my reasons for referring to Jackson's post do not reflect directly on either the SBC or the IMB. It's a long time since I had anything to do with either organisation and the contacts that I did have were generally very positive. My concern is that some of the issues which he highlights are traps that all mission agencies might be tempted to fall into. Let me highlight one of them, what the article terms a fixation on numbers.

> *Finally, numbers drive everything the IMB does. It is well known that the leading advocates forÂ Church Planting MovementsÂ (CPMs) have been IMB personal, such asÂ David Garrison,Â Ying Kai, and the lateÂ Steve Smith. This drive for high numbers comes from a sincere desire to reach as many people as possible for Christ. The negative effects of this fixation on numbers are staggering and diverse.*

The article goes on to say that this fixation on numbers leads to people being praised for having totally unrealistic goals for their ministry, while more experienced missionaries who know how hard the job really is can be criticised for their lack of faith. Numbers can also be creatively multiplied in publicity to make it look as though the work is far more successful than it is.

To repeat, this is not to criticise the IMB, but to point out that all mission agencies (and perhaps all charities) face temptations like these.

Mission agencies rely on donations from churches and individuals for their survival. If there are no donations, they will fold and they won't be able to carry on their work. These donations are given for the best of motives by people who are motivated by the work that the agency does. However, there is a crucial point that needs to be made. All that donors know about the work that the agency does is what the agency or the missionary tells them. Supporters rarely have a serious, first-hand experience of what agencies and missionaries do (and a two week visit does not count as serious) and this means that they rely on the agency or the missionary to tell them what is happening. In this context, the temptation to tell positive, heart-warming stories is very strong. You don't want to alienate potential and existing supporters by talking about things going wrong. However, discouragement and even failure are as much a part of mission life and experience as shiny-happy success. An honest and ethical approach to agency publicity will tell these stories too.

Mission agency publicity (and missionary newsletters) needs to have a strong ethical base. This probably should go without saying, but I'm saying it anyway. Some elements of this ethical foundation will include:

Not inflating numbers or success. The temptation to put a positive spin on things in order to maintain support needs to be resisted.

Being honest about failure and discouragement. Things can and do go wrong in mission work and we need to admit this.

Allowing people to speak for themselves. Whenever possible, local people or "nationals" should tell their own stories, rather than have their words and experiences interpreted by foreigners. They are the ones who really know the impact of the mission work!

Don't take the credit. Being cynical, the purpose of mission publicity is to drum up support; prayer, finance and possible recruits. In this situation it is natural to bang on about how great the mission agency is. However, any success in mission work is due to God's intervention not our efforts and we need to be honest about this.

It might seem that singing our own praise is the best way to raise support, but I'm not convinced that this is true and - even if it is - if it comes at the price of robbing God of the credit due to him, I'm not sure it's a price worth paying!

I could go on. This is an important topic and perhaps there is a need for a code of best practice for mission publicity that organisations and individuals could sign up to.

One last thought. I would encourage all mission agencies to take a long hard look at their publicity and to consider how rigorous their ethics are. I'll be blunt, in my experience, all agencies slip up from time to time. Complacency is our biggest enemy.