LEAVING A JET PLANE

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Some thoughts about an issue that mission agencies will be facing over the next few years.
Category: Observations

Over the past year, I've attended church services, international conferences, lectures, seminars and met up with friends for coffee all without leaving the house. In some ways, this isn't particularly new, I've been using video conferencing systems for years, but the pandemic has shifted everything up a gear.

People in all sorts of industries have discovered the benefits of hosting meetings on the internet. Of course, there are some distinct disadvantages; on a screen you lose some of the unspoken cues that are obvious as a part of face to face interaction and Zoom break out rooms are no substitute for informal get togethers over coffee in a break between conference sessions.

However, online meetings also have a number of distinct advantages. The cost of travel is obviously minimised and because of that, it is easy to give more people access to meetings that they would otherwise be unable to attend. Over the last year, I've sat in on lectures in South Africa, Scotland and Kenya that would have been out of my reach two years ago.

Whatever happens once the pandemic is over, I can't see us abandoning online meetings altogether. They have proved too useful and cost effective to be ignored in future.

For mission agencies, this is very important. One of the things which is not generally highlighted in mission life is the way in which some mission leaders rack up massive amounts of long-haul flying in a year. I've done it myself at points in my career. Without wishing to appear cynical, there is a cadre of mission workers who could tell you their favourite airport and frequent-flyer lounge as easily as they could recite their favourite Bible verses. Now this amount of travel might have been necessary (though, I've never been entirely convinced that it was) but today we have a viable alternative that has proved itself. Not every meeting can be held online, but many can and mission leaders should be spending much less time in airports and aeroplanes in the future.

There are a number of things which flow from this.

Firstly, agencies will be able to save some money. It won't be a huge amount, but it will be significant. More to the point, they should be able to use that money for ministry, rather than for maintaining and supporting their own structures.

Secondly - and this is important for agencies which talk about creation care - cutting down the carbon footprint of mission agencies is actually very important. There is a moral imperative to care

for the planet and agencies need to take this seriously. However, even when agencies and their leaderships do not accede to this point, it is likely that a growing number of their supporters will. In all likelihood, agencies would have been forced to cut down on some of their travel anyway in the next few years as external pressures were brought to bear.

My last thought is that some of this will be resisted by mission leaders. In my experience, many people have a love-hate relationship with extensive travel. Spending time in airport queues and wasting hours cramped in an economy can get you down after a while. However, the thrill of visiting new places, meeting old friends and taking part in *important meetings* is quite a compensation. This is important In the mission world, leaders can carry a heavy workload and take a lot of responsibility, but they do not receive a higher salary (mission leaders often see their support levels drop, when they are *promoted*). Travel and attending meetings is one of the few perks that mission leaders receive. Yes, I know that the satisfaction of serving God and his people should be enough for us - but mission leaders are human, too!

I realise, this isn't particularly profound, but it is the sort of thing that mission agencies will be working through in the next few years.