CATCHING UP WITH REALITY

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There are two facts which are shaping our understanding of the nature of mission and the role of mission agencies.

- Over the last century the demographic profile of Christianity has changed. The majority of Christians no longer live in the old "Christian countries" of Europe and North America, but are found in Latin America, Africa and Asia. As Andrew Walls put it, the centre of gravity of the church has shifted.
- As a corollary of this, we are increasingly realising that mission should not just be viewed as a movement from the "west to the rest" but from "everywhere to everywhere". In the jargon, mission is described as poly centric.

Mission agencies haven't always found it easy to adapt to these changes. After wall, they are organisations created at a time when Christianity was very much a western religion. However, many mission agencies have adopted to the changing situation and they have substantial number of non-westerners on their staff and on their leadership. Whether they have moved on from Western approaches to mission and financing is another question - but they are getting there.

However, there is one area in which agencies seem to have made few, if any, concessions to the world we are living in today and that is short-term mission. There is a huge movement to recruit short-term missionaries from the UK and to send them around the world for periods of a few weeks to a couple of years. However, I see far fewer signs of a flow of short-term missionaries into the UK, and the majority of those who do come here are from the USA.

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There are, of course, reasons for this. Writing about the volunteer movement in general (not just short-term mission) Simpson writes:

> *The processes that allow young Westerners to access the financial resources, and moral imperatives, necessary to travel and volunteer in a â€˜third world countryâ€™, are the same as the ones that make the reverse process almost impossible.Â*
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> *Quoted in: McLennnan, S. (2014) Medical voluntourism in Honduras: â€œHelping the poor?â€ .Â Progress in Development Studies,Â* ***14****, 163-179.*

We need a new missiological approach to short-term mission which focuses on mutuality and polycentric mission. This will involve facilitating short-term volunteers from the majority world coming to the West to support churches and agencies in their homelands. This approach faces significant hurdles. It is far from easy to get volunteer visas for Western countries and agencies which rely on short-term mission trips to bring in funds will struggle to find finance for this sort of reverse mission. However, the greatest problem likely lies in the fact that Western churches struggle to acknowledge that Christians from other parts of the world have anything to contribute to their life and work.Â

These thoughts emerge from a piece of work that I have have been doing which looks at short-term mission in the light of secular research into volunteering. My paper will be available as a download before the end of this week and will be free to site patreons..