CHALLENGES FOR MISSION IN THE FUTURE

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Category: Observations

Looking at the world today, I see two great challenges for the world mission movement. The first, is reaching those people who have never heard about Jesus with the gospel. This is classic mission to the "unreached" that people have been talking about for years. The second challenge is reaching what might be called the "new unreached", that is people in the Western world.

There are places in Europe and among the European diaspora, where Christianity is very firmly established and apparently flourishing. However, there are also vast tracts where there is very little at all by way of Christian witness; places where the Christian faith is just an institutional memory and which bares very little resemblance to a living, commitment to Jesus Christ. Very often, where Christianity is thriving in the Western world, it is through an influx of believers from other parts of the Globe, while the indigenous populations are often hardly evangelised.

The challenge of mission in these places is real and it is likely to grow significantly in the future. Not only that, but I believe that reaching the new unreached in Europe will be best done by Christians from the majority world. Whether these are believers who are already resident in Europe, or whether we are talking about specifically commissioned missionaries, I see outsiders as the best hope for reaching the sort of place that I live in. I realise that some will see me as unnecessarily pessimistic, but I do not see the indigenous church turning the tide of the decline in Christianity in Europe. We need outside support.

However, missionaries to Europe from the majority world will face the same sorts of problems that all missionaries face in cross-cultural work. Just as Europeans had grapple with the realities of African life and thinking, so missionaries to Europe will need to understand how to witness in a post-modern, secular context. Approaches to mission and evangelism which work back at home in Africa, Asia or Latin America will fall on deaf ears here in Europe.

There is also the challenge that many Europeans believe that we have risen above a religious viewpoint. We are rational, scientific people who no longer need the support of an imaginary God.

Christians from the rest of the world who want to reach Europe for Christ, will need the same sort of cross-cultural training that I received forty years ago, before going to Africa - but with a very different context in view.

One advantage that missionaries coming to Europe will have, is that they will not be associated with economic, military or colonial power. For a century or more, Western mission to the rest of the world

has been inextricably linked to questions of power. No matter how hard we try to shrug off our background, Westerners are associated with the massive clout that the West wields internationally. Missionaries coming to Europe from, say, Africa will not have to deal with this issue. As a result, it may be more difficult for them to get visas to work here and financing mission may be a huge struggle, but it will also be evident that any power at work in them is the power of Christ. That is a huge advantage over my generation of Western missionaries.