THINGS MISSION AGENCIES SHOULDN'T SAY #4

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Category: Observations

For obvious reasons, mission agency publicity often talks about what the agency's missionaries do. You get stories about their work, their struggles and aspects of their life in a situation very different to their home culture. These stories can be a really helpful in giving insights into the realities of mission work. However, there is a trap that agencies can fall into when telling these stories and that is giving the impression that the missionaries are perfect, or at least superhuman.

Just in case I need to clarify; missionaries aren't perfect and they aren't superhuman.

There is a special case of the perfect/superhuman trap that some agencies fall into; telling stories about their founder. Many agencies still feel a strong connection to the person that founded them decades or even a century or more ago and their founders' stories and sayings feature heavily in their literature. However, the temptation to present the agency founder as perfect/superhuman is even stronger than for contemporary missionaries.

I need to add that many missionaries are remarkable people and they do amazing things in God's strength. Their stories and the stories of the people who founded our modern agencies need to be heard. I have no hesitation in supporting the idea of recounting what God has done through these people. However, there is a delicate balance to be struck; we need to tell the stories without presenting the people involved in an inaccurate, super-spiritual light.

There are a couple of problems with the way that stories descend into hagiography. The first is that they are not true. Missionaries and the founders of mission agencies are not perfect or superhuman. They are flawed human beings like the rest of us. The remarkable things that these heroes and heroines achieve can often involve huge costs to other people who have to live with their driven nature. While we it is understandable that agencies don't focus on the failings of our heroes, we must never give the impression that they don't have them. The bottom line is that missionary hagiographies are not true and we should avoid that sort of thing like the plague.

The other problem with this sort of writing is that it is self-defeating. The purpose of mission publicity is - broadly speaking - to interest other people in supporting or joining the agency. However, when missionaries are presented as super-human it gives the impression to ordinary people that mission work is not for them.