THE FUTURE OF MISSIONS IS INDIGENOUS

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Some thoughts on what the future might hold.
Category: Observations

I recently attended an online seminar hosted by Global Connections in which Jay Matenga of the World Evangelical Alliance spoke on the theme The Future of Missions is Indigenous. Jay has written at length on this subject in the past (here for example) and it is worth reading what he has to say. In what follows, I'll note some of what Jay had to say with comments of my own inserted at the end. For the most part, what I have to say is taken from my own notes, so if I misrepresent what was said the responsibility lies with me, not with Jay. The quotes are taken directly from his Powerpoint.

Update: since I posted this, Jay has made the text of his presentation available; you can find it here.

Authority

From the earliest days of the Protestant mission movement the establishment of indigenous churches was a central goal. However, in practice, expat missionaries proved reluctant to cede their authority until the local churches had reached some unstated (and probably impossible) level of authority. It is an established norm (and not just among Western missionaries that trans-boundary missionaries carry an implicit superiority of self which is not scripturally warranted).

> *Being an authorised news reader doesn't translate to authority over or imposition upon others.*

Indigeneity

For Jay, the term indigenous refers to a series of epistemic values relating to a community orientation which contrasts with the industrial values which are based on a pragmatic Enlightenment dualism. (Read more in the link above.) While industrial broadly overlaps with the Western world, Jay sees the indigenous: industrial contrast as being fundamentally about world-view rather than geography.

> ***Industrial**: Autonomy, Contract, Transaction, Project, Productivity, Team, Merit*

> ***Indigenous**: Covenant, Mutual, Reciprocal, Growth, Family, Honour.*

These two outlooks lead to contrasting approaches to cooperation. The industrial mindset seeks partnerships to achieve a goal and when that goal is reached, the partnership dissolves. The indigenous approach is to seek community and harmony first of all.

Hybridity

The indigenous and industrial approaches are both expressions of the body of Christ and need to be held in tension as we go forward. However, the money and power and the influence lies with those of an industrial bent, it will be necessary to emphasise the indigenous in order to achieve the sort of balance that we need.

> *Our transboundary interactions are an opportunity for co-learning.*

> *Global missions needs to shed itself of its confidence in the Eurocentric theological consensus.*

We should be looking towards the establishment of authentic, orthodox churches. However, these should not be clones of the missionary sending churches. Historic orthodoxy leaves wiggle room for indigenous expressions.

I found the seminar helpful and thought provoking, though frustratingly short (then again it was held in the middle of Jay's night).

Not surprisingly, given my particular interests, I would like to have explored the way in which structures have an impact on the indigenous: industrial issue. Modern mission agencies are by their nature industrial organisations (it would be interesting to explore how the original missionary societies envisaged by Carey differ from this). To what extent can these organisations evolve to play a meaningful role in mission in the future? For me, the jury is out on this question. In one sense it was heartening to see around 80 people at the online seminar yesterday, but that is a small proportion of the UK agency leadership and there were some significant absences. Without any evidence to back it up, I suspect that some churches are much better placed than agencies to enter into genuine mutual relationships with Christians in other parts of the world. There is a conversation to be had here.

Whether the future of mission(s) turns out as Jay envisages is something that only time will reveal. However, we can be sure that it will be different to what we have been used to in the past. The question remains whether the structures and ways of thinking that have driven the British missionary movement can change to fit the new reality. We have enough momentum (and money) to keep going for a long time yet; but will we still be relevant?

> *â€œWhat is clear by now is that both the concept of mission as a one-way movement from Christendom to the un-evangelised world, and the structures devised at the close of the eighteenth century to facilitate that movement, have been overtaken by a historical developments that render them increasingly irrelevant and redundant.â€*
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> *David Smith; Mission After Christendom p. 116*