IS MISSION STRATEGY WRONG?

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Category: Mission

Tim Chester has just posted an article entitled 'Why I don't Believe in Mission Strategy'. Having worked for years as a mission strategist, I was intrigued by what he had to say. Here is a flavour of Tim's article.

> *Mission canâ€™t be planned beyond the next step because people are unpredictable. We donâ€™t know who will respond or how. In many industries you can match inputs and outputs. But in Christian ministry thereâ€™s never a neat correlation between inputs and outputs. You canâ€™t say, â€˜If I do these Bible studies with these people then I can guarantee that this is what theyâ€™ll be like at the end.â€™ Mission canâ€™t be planned beyond the next step because people are unpredictable.*
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> *And mission canâ€™t be planned beyond the next step because God is sovereign. Itâ€™s God who opens hearts to the gospel. We canâ€™t know or predict ahead of time who will become Christians. Itâ€™s Godâ€™s work to grant faith and repentance. And often he surprise us.*

I've spent a lot of my time working with missionaries, helping them look at the correlations between inputs and outputs that Tim mentions, so you might expect me to take issue with him - but I don't. I think that Tim has hit the nail right on the head here and I agree with every word (more or less).Â I recently came across a quote from Alan Roxburgh which said something very similar and perhaps puts it even better.

> *Leaders who want to cultivate missional communities in transition must set aside goal-setting and strategic planning as their primary model. Leadership in this context is not about forecasting, but about the formation of networks of discourse among people. It's about the capacity to engage the realities of people's lives and contexts in dialogue with Scripture. (Quoted in Metavista: Bible, Church and Mission in an Age of Imagination (Faith in an Emerging Culture) (Faith in an Emerging Culture) p.168)*

So, how then do I justify having spent years of my life involved in strategic planning for mission?

- Mission covers a broader range of activities than Church planting, which Tim is focussing on. In Bible translation we have a complex process which involves translators, training, consultants and money for printing all being available when they are needed. Without some sort of advance planning, we could not hope to have the right people in the right place at the right time.
- We are also stewards of other peoples' resources. We rely on kind donors to fund much of what we do; and we need to plan carefully in order to make sure that we spend their money wisely and let them know what we have spent it on. The British government actually requires

that we make a good account of any funds we send overseas, so careful management, planning and reporting are legal necessities.
- But these are the technical aspects of our work. As Tim says, there are industries where you can match input and outputs: and Bible translation is a bit like that. If you get the right people in the right environment and provide them with the technical help they need, they can translate the Scriptures, or produce literacy books, or whatever... But what we can never guarantee is how people will read and respond to the message. Experience and study tells us that certain activities and techniques are more likely to result in people reading the Bible, but there are no certainties in this area.

No matter how good our funding, planning or management systems are, we cannot be certain that people will take up and read translated Scriptures. In some ways, it would be nice that we could make these sorts of promises but Aslan is not a tame lion and God is not constrained by our plans.Â I look forward to the rest of Tim's posts in this series.