SHOULD THE WEST BE SENDING MISSIONARIES? HISTORY

Posted on November 18, 2010 by Eddie

Categories: Church: World, Observations

This is the first of what is planned to be a three part mini-series. Before any of my colleagues get upset, I do believe that the West should continue to send out missionaries to the rest of the world, but asking hard questions is a good way of making us face up to some issues that we might otherwise ignore.

Though it only merits a footnote in many history books, one of the most important phenomena of the last two hundred years is the protestant missionary movement. Through the work of missionaries, mainly drawn from Europe and the United States, the Christian faith has grown into a world-wide movement. However, at the same time as Christianity has grown exponentially in the Southern continents it has also experienced a decline in its traditional home. You can read more about this in an essay I wrote here.

> *In 1800, well over 90% of Christians lived in Europe and North America, whereas in 1990 over 60% lived in Africa, South America, Asia and the Pacific, with that proportion increasing each year.*

Andrew Walls describes this as a shift in the centre of gravity of the church from the North and West to the Southern continents. Walls argues that this sort of shift has happened on more than one occasion in church history. New life has sprung up on the margins of the Church, while the centre has declined.

> *What happened in each case was decay in the heartland that appeared to be at the center of the faith. At the same time, through the missionary effort, Christianity moved to or beyond the periphery, and established a new center. When the Jerusalem church was scattered to the winds, Hellenistic Christianity arose as a result of the mission to the gentiles. And when Hellenistic society collapsed, the faith was seized by the barbarians of northern and western Europe. By the time Christianity was receding in Europe, the churches of Africa, Asia and Latin America were coming into their own. The movement of Christianity is one of serial, not progressive, expansion. (Full article here.)*

The upshot of this is that, contrary to popular thinking, the West is no longer the centre of the Christian faith, Africa, Asia and Latin America are. We in Europe, in particular, now live on the margins of the Christian world (a fact captured by Rombo in this comment). The notion that Europe is a Christian land and that the rest of the world is a 'mission field' is one that we need to ditch completely as being totally unrepresentative of the world we live in.

If this is the case, is it realistic that the countries at the margins of Christianity should be sending missionaries to parts of the world with larger and more vibrant Christian communities? We have to ask the question. It is not unusual to hear people say that they have a vision of Britain becoming a

great missionary sending nation once more, but is such a vision appropriate in a day and age when the Church has gone through such a profound shift?

Of course one reason that we continue to send missionaries from this part of the world is that we have agencies which are created to do just that. There are hundreds of mission agencies of all shapes and sizes recruiting people and sending them off around the world in a pattern that is hundreds of years old. It seems to me, that agencies need to rethink their purpose. If they exist simply to recruit and support missionaries, then they will continue to do so, even if that is no longer appropriate for them. However, if they re-imagine their purpose as being to support the work that God is doing in their particular sphere of interest - whatever that means - then they will have a reason to continue to function. That may involve recruiting missionaries, or it may involve something entirely different; who knows?

It seems to me that the way in which Wycliffe is evolving into a global network gives a picture of the way in which mission agencies need to be developing at this time in history.

As I end this article, let me reiterate, that I do believe that their is still a role for Western Missionaries, but I also believe that this role has to take into account the changing picture of world Christianity. Business as usual is not a valid option.