SHOULD THE WEST BE SENDING MISSIONARIES? CULTURE

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Category: Observations

This is the second in a series of blog posts investigating this question. You can find the first post here.

In this post, I would like to briefly highlight three closely interlinked, cultural issues which I believe make it difficult for Westerners to be fully effective as missionaries in the majority world.

Power. Western missionaries almost invariably come from countries which are richer and more culturally and politically powerful than the ones to which they are going. This is so blindingly obvious, that it may not even occur to us as being an issue. However, I believe that the economic and power disparity between missionaries and their receiving community can distort both relationships and the message of the Gospel.

Sadly, it is very difficult to form real, mutual, relationships when one party is massively richer than the other.Perhaps it shouldn't be, but it is. I learned long ago to stop protesting to my African colleagues that, by English standards, I wasn't particularly rich - by their standards, I was unbelievably wealthy whether I realised it or not.Â Equally, the cultural baggage (vestiges of Empire, historic church-mission relations etc.) that comes with missionaries from the West means that it is often assumed that they will take on leadership roles in situations where it is far more appropriate for local citizens to be in charge. This is slowly changing in many situations, but no where near fast enough.

In a similar vein, the Gospel of a suffering, crucified servant takes on a strange dimension when the person announcing it is clearly embarassingly rich. I don't think it is any surprise that prosperity teachingÂ - the health and wealth Gospel - has taken off so much in many parts of the world. The notion that Christians can expect to become rich is part of the unspoken legacy of Western mission work.

You have a problem, we have the answer. One of the features of the Western world is our belief that we know what is best for the rest of the planet: our form of democracy, our view of free trade, our concept of development... The same attitude is often apparent in Christian mission: we come with our solutions, but do we have a real understanding of the problems that people face? This sort of thing is seen at its starkest in some short-term mission programmes, where groups of well intentioned Westerners come to an area to do building work or some other social project - not realising that in the process they are rendering local builders and painters unemployed and distorting the whole economy of the area.

Worldview. Most Westerners unconsciously hold to a scientific worldview which is shaped by the society we live in. Though Christians obviously have a place for God in their view of things, they tend to dismiss other types of belief as superstition or worse. People from other parts of the world often see spiritual cause and effect in a far wider range of issues than their western counterparts. A mismatch occurs, when the westerner brings a scientific solution to something which is seen as a spiritual problem. I came across an example of this in West Africa where it is often believed that disease is caused by witchcraft. 'The missionary says that malaria is caused by a mosquito, but what

I want to know is who sent the mosquito?" By bringing scientific/rationalist solutions to problems, missionaries seem to ignore a whole level of reality which is perceived by their host culture. It is one of the strange ironies of missionary history is that although missionaries have brought the good news of Jesus to many places, they have often also been a strong force for secularisation.

Just in closing, I'd like to give a couple of stories from my own experience that illustrate these factors at work.

In 1988 Sue and I spent a few months in Abidjan before moving up country to start work in the Kouya area. While we were there, I was asked to step in for the Centre Services Director who would be absent for a month or so. I was happy to help out and soon discovered that I didn't need to do anything because there was a local employee who knew all of the ropes and was perfectly capable of running the department without being supervised by someone who had only been in the country for a week or so. We've moved on since then, thankfully, but I still look back at the incident with dreadful embarrassment.

A few years later, a regional church supervisor asked me to arrange for a missionary to come and work in his area. Not because he needed someone to preach and teach, but because he didn't have a car and needed someone to drive him around! Clearly this church leader wasn't particularly impressed with the ability of missionaries to lead in the church, but he was also convinced that they all turn up with big cars!

In closing, let me restate what I said in the earlier post. I do believe that Western missionaries have a great contribution to make, however, I also believe that they come with some cultural baggage which needs to be addressed when they are recruited and trained.