IS THE TERM 'MISSIONARY' PAST ITS SELL BY DATE?

Posted on November 20, 2010 by Eddie

Categories: Mission, Observations

This post is tangentially linked to my (as yet unfinished) series on whether or not the West should still send out missionaries (1, 2).

In a comment on the first part of the series, David Ker wrote:

> *You know Iâ€™ve struggled with being called a missionary. Iâ€™ve even questioned why my sending organization calls us missionaries.*

Interestingly, I came across an article in a secular newspaper that talks about SIL, the organisation with whom David works in South Africa. The article focusses on the production of the Ethnologue, a catalogue of the world's languages, but also touches on the issue of the use of the term 'missionary'.

> *But if Ethnologueâ€™s working method hasnâ€™t changed in the last half-century, the image it projects to the outside world has. The Grimes had no objection to calling themselves missionaries, but Lewisâ€™s generation is squeamish about the label. â€œThe stereotype is not one we want to own,â€ he says. â€œWe describe ourselves as linguists, translators, development workers, and we do it as a faith-based organisation and out of a Christian motivation.â€*

I know that in the UK, the term missionary carries with it a number of connotations which are far from positive and people are increasingly shying away from it. That being said, I'm not sure that we have come across an alternative that can easily be used in its place.

I think it is important to note that there is nothing particularly sacred about the term missionary. It doesn't have a particularly long history in the Church. As long as Christians are witnessing to Christ and making disciples, it doesn't particularly matter what term is used to describe the activities.