SHOULD THE WEST BE SENDING MISSIONARIES? PART 3

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Category: Bible & Mission

This is the third part in a series which I started a couple of weeks ago. You can find the earlier posts here: history, culture.

Reaction to my earlier posts has been interesting. There were more comments both on the blog itself and on twitter than we normally receive, which is gratifying. Some of the reaction could have been summed up by one of my colleagues who said that the central question was a no-brainer, we obviously have to keep sending missionaries. In a similar vein one comment on twitter said that asking this question was like asking the church to disobey Christ. I have some sympathy with these points of view, but I also think that they are somewhat flawed.

The Church is called to be a witness to Jesus (Acts 1:8) and to make disciples (Matthew 28:19). These commands are universal and apply to all Christians everywhere and in every time. The two passages from Matthew and Luke also assume that Christians will bear witness and make disciples in all parts of the world. So, all Christians everywhere are to make disciples and bear witness to Christ to all people everywhere. You can't argue with that: see Serge's comment on an earlier post.

However, we should not make the mistake of assuming that sending missionaries is the same as bearing witness to Christ and making disciples. We are very apt to confuse our own cultural expressions of the Christian faith with the deeper reality of the faith itself and this is a case in point.Â The modern missionary movement is one response (among many) from the Church to God's call to serve him. (If you want more on this theme, see the following post.)

There are many, many people who are bearing witness to Christ in cross-cultural situations who would not be described as 'missionaries' in a classic sense. There are many diaspora movements, where African and Asian Christians have migrated to other countries and are bearing witness to Christ in their new situations. Christian women from the Philippines are working as house maids in some Muslim countries and share the Gospel with their employers at great personal risk. Yes, I believe that the West should continue to send missionaries, but the day may come when the missionary movement has past its sell by date - but the responsibility to bear witness to Christ and make disciples will still be there. We'll just have to find new and creative ways to achieve that.

In the meantime, the West should continue to send missionaries, but I believe that there are three issues that we need to take on board in this part of the world.

The West Needs To Receive Missionaries. If all Christians everywhere have a responsibility to make disciples of all nations, then Asian, African and Latin Christians have to take seriously the call to make disciples in Europe and North America and the European and American Church has to have the humility to accept help and support from brothers and sisters from around the world. It is good for Britain that the Archbishop of York is a Ugandan. I hope that the wonderful example of John Sentamu will open the gates for a new generation of disciple makers to come to the UK.

The West Needs to Send the Right Missionaries. The issues of power, arrogance and worldview

which I raised in the second post in this series are real and need to be addressed. The current trend for short term mission service and abbreviated cross-cultural training for missionaries does not serve us well in this area. We need people who are willing to invest time and who are willing to learn from others, so that they will be better equipped to serve. To me the ideal situation is for Western Missionary candidates to train alongside Christian workers from the culture where they will be working. This helps people gain a much deeper insight into their own culture and their strengths and weaknesses. Obviously, there are practical issues to be dealt with, but I believe that we need to see as many future missionaries as possible receiving training on their field of service. Ben Byerly is studying for a PhD at a Kenyan seminary and often has interesting things to share about his experiences learning with African men and women (do you have any comments here, Ben?)

The West needs to Rethink the Role of Missionaries. To many, the ideal missionary is someone who disappears off to the ends of the earth, only returns home for the odd furlough and eventually has to be forced to retire and be dragged back to their home country. OK, I exaggerate - but you know what I mean. However, this model of long term missionaries who only return home rarely reflected an age where travel and communication was far more difficult than it is now. I am convinced that missionaries should return home more often than they do now, not for rest and relaxation (though that is important) or for raising support (important, also) but to minister to their home congregations. Missionaries who work outside of their home country are privileged to gain new insights into the way God is at work and the meaning of the Scriptures and the church in the West needs these insights. Classically, we have viewed missionaries as people who go from the West to share God's blessing with other countries - and that is still relevant. But I believe that we also need to see them as people who can share God's blessing from other countries with their home culture. The things that God teaches a missionary in Asia or the Pacific could be extremely helpful in the UK which is increasingly a cross-cultural, post-Christian society. Missionaries are people being trained in another culture to go home and minister in their own!

I realise that there are all sorts of practical problems involved in this concept, but I believe that it is something we need to consider for the reasons I raised in my two earlier posts.

These thoughts are far from fully formed, but the great thing about asking difficult questions is that it forces you to think through issues that you might otherwise take for granted. I would value any comments or reflections and I should say in passing, that these are my own reflections and don't reflect the position of the organisation I work for!