ISSUES IN MISSION: WINE, WINESKINS AND PARADIGMS

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Categories: Mission, Observations

We need to completely rethink our approach to mission and to supporting mission work from the UK. Tinkering at the edges and solving problems are no longer enough.

This is another in my series of posts in response to Rollins Gram's articles on issues in mission. When I first posted a link to these posts on Facebook, a friend commented that it was all well and good to raise issues, but where could we find the people working towards solutions. To which I replied, that I'm not convinced that the idea of a solution is a useful one today. This post is an attempt to explain why, I believe this.

A couple of years ago, I was in a prayer meeting and someone prayed, asking God that Britain would once again become a great missionary sending nation as it had been in the past. (Do I hear an amen?)

Actually, I'd rather not hear an amen. I believe that going back to where we were is the last thing we need.

A hundred years ago, the majority of Christians lived in the Western World and missionaries were sent in huge numbers from Britain (and other countries) to the rest of the world to bring the Gospel. This endeavour was incrediblyÂ successful; so much so that the church has grownÂ enormouslyÂ in areas where there were virtually no Christians just a few decades ago. At the same time, the percentage of Christians in the West has declined precipitously. To quote Â well worn phrase, there has been a shift in the Centre of Gravity of the Church. The role and place of cross-cultural missionaries has changed dramatically over the last one hundred years and we need to think through what this means for the future. Even if we could solve all of the problems that Gram raises in his paper - we still wouldn't have addressed the pressing issue of what mission looks like in a post-Christendom world. Fixing the things that have gone wrong in order to go back to what we were doing soÂ successfullyÂ before, is not an option; we need a new way of thinking about mission for a very different new world.

All of this is before we mention other issues which have an impact on mission: the decline in the number ofÂ ChristiansÂ in the UK coupled with a (counterintuitive) rise in the number of denominations, the ageing of the Church (according to the last Churches census, 59% of churches have no one in the age range 20 to 30), the multiplication of mission agencies ... And so it goes on.

To take misquote Jesus, I don't believe that we can fit the wine of cross-cultural mission into the old wineskins of our attitudes, structures and approaches. Or, in other words, we need a paradigm shift (of which, more later, perhaps).