OUR PLACE IN THE WORLD

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Britain is no longer a major economic or political force in the world. In the same way, the British church needs to learn to find a new place in a rapidly growing world Christian movement.
Categories: Church: UK, Church: World

I am a child of the British Empire; or, more accurately, a child of the legacy of Empire. When I was in school, vast swathes of the world map were coloured pink to show that these were countries that Britain ruled (or had recently ruled - we didn't have new atlases!). In reality, the Empire was already a thing of the past by the time I was born; Britain was in decline. In the immortal words of Sellars and Yeatman by 1918 "America was now clearly top nation and so history came to an".

Despite this decline, we hung on to notions of grandeur. I recall a joke my father told me about a British ship being hailed by a counterpart from the US Navy. "How is the world's second largest navy?", shouted the American. "Fine", said the British Captain, "and how is the world's second best?".

During my lifetime, the United Kingdom has had to slowly grow to realise that we are not the second biggest, nor are we really the best. We are a small nation among many other nations on the earth. This is a reality that we find hard to grasp as a poll in today's Telegraph demonstrates.

In an excellent short talk at the recent Global Connections conference, John Stevens of the FIEC pointed out that the position of the British church is analogous to the position of the United Kingdom in world politics. In the same way that we are getting used to Britain no longer being a dominant economic, political or military force in the world, we also need to adjust our expectations of the role of the British church in the world. While the number of Christians has declined in the UK, the church around the world has grown rapidly and we need to find our appropriate place within the wider ecclesiastical world.

This is a theme I've come back to several times over the last few years.

This piece is part of a series I wrote last summer.

> *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*
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> *to think through what this means for the future.*

This one looks at the issue of mission out of exile:

> *The Danish physicist Neils Bohr said that it is difficult to make predictions, especially when it concerns the future. I think this can be applied to the situation of the church in the UK today. Â There is one school of thought that says we are living through a paradigm shift which will*

> *see an almost terminal decline in the church in Europe and a reawakening at the periphery. Others believe that things have more or less stabilised as they are. Our Grandchildren will be able to tell us how it all worked out.*
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> *I donâ€™t know what the future holds, but one thing I am sure of is that it wonâ€™t be the past! We canâ€™t go back! Things are not like they used to be and they never will be again. Britain will never be the great missionary sending country that it was in the past â€“ it may, in Godâ€™s mercy, be a different sort of great missionary sending country, but the social and political factors, not to mention the religious ones, which allowed for the great mission movements of the 19thÂ and 20thÂ centuries have ended. We need to look to a new sort of future and not try and revisit the past.*

And in this one, I make a surprising foray into the world of football:

> *Despite our history of not doing very well in international football, there is still an expectation that England should do well â€“ after all, this is footballâ€™s homeland.*
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> *And what about the Church? For years, centuries even, Western Europe was the centre of the Christian faith. The United Kingdom was a great missionary sending nation â€“ we took Christianity to the world. But, just like with football, those pesky foreigners have taken Christianity and seem to be doing it better than we do. The Church around the world is growing and developing like never before, while in the traditional homelands, it is struggling. The next generation of world Christian leaders will not be from Europe or the US, but from Africa, Asia and Latin America.*
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> *Last nightâ€™s match may provide a much needed dose of reality for English football; we need to abandon our dreams of grandeur and start to learn from the way other nations have moved ahead of us. The Church in Britain needs to do something similar; we need to start learning from the Church around the world.*