WHAT MISSION SPEAKERS DON'T UNDERSTAND ABOUT MISSION

Posted on April 29, 2014 by Eddie

In which I suggest three ways in which many mission speakers do not always reflect the reality of mission today.
Categories: Church: UK, Church: World, Mission

Last week, I published a post which suggested that some people who are invited to speak on cross-cultural mission at high profile events, don't actually have the background needed for them to do so. In the comments, a couple of people asked me to be more specific about the issues which concern me; so here goes...

Misunderstanding the Role of the Missionary:Â Mission literature is full of stories of Godly, highly motivated and slightly bonkers individuals who did amazing things that no one else would do, forming their own missionary agencies in the process. The reality has always been that people like these have been in the minority; they have books written about them because they are unusual. From the days of Paul, missionaries have generally worked in teams rather than on their own (and from the days of Paul, inter-team conflict has been a major cause of missionary attrition). Today, missionaries may have toÂ take direction from local church leaders and bodies and they will certainly have to work within visa restrictions imposed by governments which may or may not be sympathetic to their work. Someone who wants to follow 'a call from God' and go their own way, is likely to be more of a liability than a help on the field.

The skills, attitudes and mindsetÂ required by those who have to live and work in multi-cultural situations are very different from those of the have-a-go heroes of missionary hagiography.

Yet, over the past few years, I have heard a number of big-name preachers giving mission sermons which have emphasised the mythic aspect of the missionary past, rather than the present realities of life in our current day, complex world.

Underestimating the World Church:Â TheÂ British Empire may have faded into the sunset, but you can still catch vestiges of the colonial past in the way some people talk about mission.Â In many parts of the world, the Church is growing far faster today than it is in the UK, despite Christians facing problems of poverty, conflict and active persecution. Yes, there are problems in the majority world church, but more often than not it exhibits a depth of spirituality and devotion that put us to shame.

Despite this, I often hear people implying that missionaries from the UK are going to 'solve the problems' of churches in other parts of the world.Â There are two ways in which I see this happen. Firstly, people will suggest that there is a need to provide practical or professional skills in a situation, without any awareness of the realities on the ground. In many situations, the problem is not that there are no people with professional qualifications, the problem is a lack of jobs - which is exacerbated by expats coming over to show local people how to do things they already know how to do! The second way in which this is shown is through the assumption that there is something inherently superior about western-theology. There is a particularly egregious example of this highlighted by a Sri Lanken leader, here.

Unwillingness to Learn from Mission Experience: Over the last few centuries, missionaries have learned some hard lessons about their craft. Mistakes have been made and made again and again, but people have learned. Cross-cultural mission work today is very different, in many ways to the

way it was a century ago (thankfully!). I would be the first to admit that mistakes are still being made, but that is not to deny that much has been learned. What's more, some of what has been learned might be useful back in the 'home country' and it certainly might be useful on the 'mission field'.

Let me give an example. Over the past twenty or so years a vast amount of research and learning has gone into the way in which oral learners can best engage with Scripture. You can get an insight into the literature here. To put it simply, oral learners learn best through stories and narrative rather than through the reasoned propositional argument favoured by literate learners. As a result, a number of new ways of teaching Scripture such as Chronological Bible storying have been developed for use in oral contexts. These are hardly new, Jesus used a very similar approach for the majority of his teaching, after all.

In post-modern Britain, oral approaches such as the Mark Drama may well be the best way to help people engage with Scripture in our context. We have a good deal to learn from missionary experience with Scripture engagement. However, I rarely hear the big name speakers saying we have much to learn, but I often hear of them going to parts of the world where orality is the norm to teach expository preaching; the antithesis of oral approaches.

There is nothing wrong with expository preaching *per se*. It is certainly my preferred way to learn from the Scriptures, but it is not a universal way of learning.

I realise that each of these points is more nuanced than I have indicated here. This is a short post which covers a lot of ground. However, I have written about each of these in more depth in earlier posts on Kouyanet. The links to related articles, below, might get you started if you want to read more.

If you feel that there are issues that I've not mentioned, then feel free to add them in the comments.