WORLD RECORDS AND MISSION

Posted on September 15, 2014 by Eddie

Category: Observations

Not many people know that I am a world record holder. Yes, me! I hold the record for the the number of controlled rebounds from the step by the back gate of the yard where I lived as a child. It isn't as easy as it sounds. You have to kick the ball at the right speed towards the gate; too slow and it doesn't bounce back, too fast and it would go over the step and bounceÂ any old how. You had to get it just right, so that it caught the top of the step and bounced back to you through the air, where you would have one touch to control the ball, before starting again. As I remember, the record was fifteen consecutive rebounds. Good eh?

Of course, the biased BBC never mentions this; they are always talking about the 400 metres, the long jump and things like that. It seems as though my record isn't all that important; perhaps I was measuring the wrong thing.

Which is a convoluted way of introducing the concept of measuring things in mission. Mission agencies are very keen on measuring things; how many people made decisions, how many churches were planted and even how many Bibles have been translated.Â They like to be able to demonstrate that they are achieving concrete results; especially when they are trying to raise money. Donors like to give their hard earned cash to people who have a proven track record for achievement.

However,Â I wonder whether lots of missionary statistics are rather like my backyard rebound record; interesting to the people involved, but not very meaningful in the real world. Â Let me explain.

When Paul writes to the Philippians, people he describes as partners, he doesn't commend them for their success in spreading the Gospel message (though it seems they had some), but he prays that they willÂ grow and knowledge and understanding. Likewise, when he wrote to the Colossians, he mentions that they have been involved in mission, but he thanks God for their faith and prays that they will learn more about their faith. At no point, does Paul list their successes or failures; his concern is not for the number of churches, but for the quality of peoples' lives.

This is a dreadful communications technique. He'd never raise any serious money talking like that!

Don't get me wrong, I'm not opposing measuring mission work. After all, even Luke gives us numbers from time to time (including on the day of Pentecost). Good assessment of where things are going right and where they are going wrong is important in planning for future work and the use of resources. However, we should never fool ourselves into thinking that numbers alone are a mark of success in Christian mission. They aren't.

There is an interesting assessment of the impact of Bible translation in two African countries available here. In amongst the plethora of statistics and graphs, there is a stirling attempt to get to grips with the real impact of the translation projects. However, the report is an excellent example of the way in which true spiritual transformation is not easily amenable to survey techniques; and nor

should it be. Only God actually knows what has been achieved and by whom, and for the moment, he is not telling.