MISSIONARIES KNOW BEST

Posted on December 3, 2014 by Eddie

I have no doubt that churches around the world have a lot to learn from missionaries; it was ever thus. Paul wrote the most extraordinary theological and pastoral letters based on his missionary experience. However, there is a good deal to be learned in the other direction, too. Missionaries need to be open to hear what churches have to say and not be so obsessed with their own agendas that they don't take time to listen.
Category: Observations

I remember talking to a pastor in rural Ivory Coast back in the 1990s. He asked me to arrange for a missionary to come out from the UK to help his church because no one had a car and they desperately needed someone to drive them around to distant villages. I smiled politely and made a non-committal grunt, while trying to imagine the reaction of someone who had spent four years training and support raising only to be told that they were needed as a glorified chauffeur.

The point is that there is often a mismatch between the expectations and competencies of churches and missionaries.

In a comment on a post here a few days ago, Dr John Gribbens wrote:

> *... very many churches are unable to work out whether or not a person is suited to somewhere the church knows little about. There are very many pitfalls churches get into when sending missionaries and very many costly mistakes are made. Costly in the terms of the effect it has on the candidate, the nationals on the field, and to many others.*
>
> *It seems very important to avoid the idea that if it is OK by the church, it is then OK. Churches are very fallible and there is no guarantee that if a church says it is right, that means it is right. It may well not be, which I am sure you are very aware of.*

In other words, churches in the home country are often fallible and not really capable of supporting missionaries.Â I realise that this does happen, but my experience both as a supported missionary and as a mission agency leader shows me that many churches are extremely competent in this area.

Meanwhile, Simon has some comments on relationships between missionaries and churches in Japan.

> *Very recently we had a big meeting between our missionaries and local church leaders, and it was incredibly obvious that the local church leaders really did not have a clear grasp of why missionaries were there, or at least why the missionaries thought they were there. They believed that we were here to serve the churches in any way that the churches needed; and much of modern missiology would agree that this is the way it should be. But we thought we were here to plant churches, and that was what we have been trained to do. If we knew that we were expected to act as interim church pastors (because thatâ€™s the need that the churches have right now) then we would have been better off going to seminaries, not to mission training colleges. We know how to evangelise, contextualise, and discipleâ€"we donâ€™t know how to perform a wedding or a funeral.*

In other words, churches on the field don't understand missionaries, either (presumably the Japanese church doesn't needÂ chauffeurs).

Obviously, I can't comment on the specifics of Simon's or Dr Gribbens experience. However, that won't stop me making a few generalisations about the relationships between churches and missionaries.

What strikes me about both of these piecesÂ is the apparent (note, I say apparent) assumption that the missionary is right and the church wrong. Churches don't know enough, so missionaries should just get on and do their thing anyway. Missionaries know best.

I have no doubt that churches around the world have a lot to learn from missionaries; it was ever thus.Â Paul wrote the most extraordinary theological and pastoral letters based on his missionary experience. However, there is a good deal to be learned in the other direction, too. Missionaries need to be open to hear what churches have to say and not be so obsessed with their own agendas that they don't take time to listen. After all, as Paul Davies said in a comment on Facebook:

> *Really, the church is the missionary not the person, hence the individual serves the church in its mission. Now when the church only wants to serve itself, we have a problem. Does the individual go and do what the church should be doing, thereby threatening unity? Or does the individual submit to the church and risk nothing being done? Three things that it are important to highlight. One is that the church is God's main instrument to fulfil his mission in the world. Secondly, God's mission is far too important to leave to missionaries and ministers (C. J. H.Wright). Therefore, if we want to serve God in his mission then we need to facilitate the church in its mission.*

A Little More Conversation a Little Less Action Please: Churches, missionaries and mission agencies need to be in constant and open dialogue.Â Churches and church leaders are fallible (so are missionaries and candidates), but they can learn and they can develop the ability to support mission more adequately. Equally, missionaries need to understand something of the challenges that church leaders in the UK face; it isn't all sitting round drinking cups of tea and reading books. The problem is that missionaries tend to be activists who want to get on with things as quickly as possible, while church leaders are desperately busy. Important conversations, all too often, do not happen.

Similar things often happen on the mission field. Missionaries are in a hurry to get on with their stuff, but church leaders are involved inÂ lots of other things. There is a mismatch of expectations and very often a breakdown in relationships.Â Â However, if the aim of the missionaries is to plant viable, self-sustaining churches, then they are going to have to plug into the agenda of the local church at some point - either that or they can simply continue the Western tradition of exporting denominational divisions to the world.

As I move into a new role with Global Connections, one of my biggest concerns is the lack of dialogue between churches and mission sending agencies. It is a simple fact that very few church

leaders turn up in the fora where overseas mission is the main topic and very few mission leaders are invited to speak to groups of church leaders. To mis-quote Mark Knopfler

> *you and meÂ go parallel, together and apart, we keep a perfect distance and its tearing at my heart.*

We need to find ways to break down that perfect distance both in the UK and on the field. It won't be easy and it certainly won't be comfortable. Both church leaders and missionaries may find themselves having to make compromises. I recall facilitating a meeting with church leaders from Central Africa, looking at how we could promote Bible translation in a particular setting. It soon became obvious that they were not really interested in Bible translation (which was a bit of a shock to a translation organisation), but they desperately needed HIV training materials in local languages. That was something we could help with, even if it wouldn't have been our first choice.

One further thought. Simon writes:

> *There are two common dogmas amongst the more enlightened parts of the mission community; first, that the way forward for Christian mission to is partnership in local churches, and second, allied to that, that local churches and local Christians know best how to evangelise their own people.* ***These were the sort of things that were drummed into me at fairly right-on mission colleges****, but Iâ€™m actually becoming more and more uncomfortable with both of them.*

Is part of the problem the fact that we often train missionaries and pastors in different institutions? If you want to be a pastor go to this college, if you want to be a missionary go to that one.Â There are good reasons for having pastors and missionaries following different curricula in some areas, but much of their training can, and perhaps should, overlap. I remember church leaders in Ivory Coast insisting that African Bible translators should train in the same institutions as pastors so that both sides understood the importance and challenges of the work the others did. Actually, I would go a little further and suggest that, when and where possible, long-term missionaries should usually do their training in the place where they are going to serve. There are huge practical problems with this, but the benefits are huge when it happens.

For anyone who has read Simon's complete post (and you all should), I realise that I haven't really touched on his main theme. That would take a different and longer post - one which I will probably not get round to writing. However, it does seem that he and I have very different perceptions of what serving local church leadership means. Perhaps I need to pad my ideas out a bit further.Â

Before anyone complains, the title of this post is deliberately hyperbolic.Â