MISSION IN CRISIS

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Category: Mission

Yesterday, I commented on a recent blog post from New Zealand which looked at the future of mission agencies through a particular model of organisational behaviour. The original blog post and, to some extent, my reply engendered a debate about the way that the situation changes from country to country and how this will impact mission agencies.

There was a lot of good stuff in the twitter conversation and blog comments and it is hard to argue with much that was said.

but...

I struggleÂ with much of this conversation, because I believe that the problemsÂ facing mission agencies are a symptom of a deeper question, and that deeper issueÂ is being more or less ignored.

In 1991, David Bosch wrote a book that many consider to be one of the most important theologies of mission of our age;Â Transforming Mission. In the introduction, Bosch asserted that mission is facing Â crisis because of massive changes in the church and the wider world. He suggested six ways in which this crisis manifests itself (though he does not claim that the list is exhaustive).

- The advance of science and technology, and the worldwide process of secularisation.
- The slow but steady de-Christianistion of the West.
- The fact that the world can no longer be divided into "Christian" and "non-Christian" spheres.
- Western guilt for racism and colonialism, leading to an unwillingness to engage in mission.
- The increasing gap between the rich and the poor.
- The reaction against over-academic Western theology in many parts of the church.

Over the years, I've looked at some of these issues in more detail than others. The important thing to understand is that these are issues which touch the whole church worldwide, not just the Western mission movement. The challenges which agencies currently face, emerge out of these issues, but they are not the only ones who are impacted.

This means that in looking to the future of mission, we have to look at a whole world solution, not just look at what will happen to the agencies that we are familiar with. Of course, it is natural and right that those of us who work within the Western agency model concentrate on the area that we are familiar with. However, as we do so, we flirt with (at least) two dangers:

- We run the risk of over-stating the importance of our particular historical model of mission;Â of assuming that our structures and way of doing things must not only be preserved, but must be exported to the rest of the world, so that they can have their 'western agencies' too.
- By concentrating on our own field of mission, we may well fail to spot the way in which God is actually getting his mission achieved around the world. If mission history teaches us anything, it is that there are no limits to the Spirit's flexibility, but that human beings take a long time to catch on to what he is doing.

So, as we wrestle with the way that agencies need to adapt and change in the future, we need to bear in mind that their challenges are only one expression of a much deeper, world-wide move of the Spirit of God.

I'm never entirely convinced by the distinction betweenÂ *mission* andÂ *missions* that some people draw. However, this oft quoted (by me) passage from David Smith does show why the distinction matters:

> *At this point the distinction between mission, as the abiding obligation and mark of the church of Christ at all times and in all places, and missions, signifying specific, historically conditioned institutions created to advance the cause of the kingdom of God in particular cultural situations becomes vitally important. To fail to make this distinction, and therefore to identify a specific inherited paradigm of mission and its organisational structures with mission itself, is to risk being locked into an obsolete model and so to be condemned to increasingly futile and frustrating activity. Any serious study of the history of the Christian mission leads to the conclusion that, while the cross-cultural transmission of the faith constitutes the very lifeblood of the church and is one of the most vital religious characteristics, the means and methods by which this has been done are various and many. Thus, while mission is a biblical universal, the modern missionary movement was a specific, culturally conditioned initiative which, while amazing successful in its time, is likely to be come increasingly dysfunctional if the attempt is made to preserve it in the new context we have described.*

FromÂ Mission After ChristendomÂ by David Smith p.116.