MISSIONARY SAYINGS: SENDING CAPACITY

Posted on February 21, 2017 by Eddie

Depth counts more than breadth. It's not the church's "sending capacity" that really interests me, its the "church's capacity to be sent" which really shows commitment.
Category: Church: UK

The strength of a church does not lie in its seating capacity, but in its sending capacity.

There are numerous variations on this saying doing the rounds and like all of the sayings that I've highlighted in this series, this one is useful, up to a point.

Let's start by acknowledging that the good stuff. The phrase is motivational, it helps churches to think about their impact in the world and not just about what happens within the walls of the building on a Sunday. It also does a good job of debunking the myth that big churches areÂ *a priori* better than small ones. These are good and important correctives to much sterile thinking about church life and any phrase that can express this in so few words has got a lot going for it.

However, I do have one or two little reservations about this saying; so here goes.

Firstly, and I realise that this isn't fashionable, the church isn't all about mission. We have a role as a worshipping and serving community, a place where people can be welcomed and can be drawn into the life of a people as they worship and serve God. Perhaps the seating capacity is a bit of a red herring, but the welcoming capacity is absolutely key.

Secondly, I'm not sure thatÂ sending is always quite what it seems. I know churches who have mission notice boards covered with photographs ofÂ *theirÂ* mission partners. However, when you probe things a bit further, the partners have only a tangential connection to the church, and the church's commitment to them hardly goes beyond sending a regular check and praying for them once a month. There is no real sense of accountability, pastoral support or deep engagement in the work. This underlines a problem with the saying; it apparently expresses things in numerical terms rather than something more substantial. We know that the number of bums on seats in a church is not a real measure of discipleship. Equally, the number of mission partners that a church supports may not indicate the church's real engagement with mission. Better a deep, sustained, mutually-accountable relationship with one mission family than a surface relationship with lots of people who are hardly known by the congregation.

Ultimately, I think my unease about this saying is that it seems to be rooted in an individualistic approach to church and mission. The church is a body, who sends out individuals to do stuff and the more individuals that you can send, the better. However, I think that it is far more helpful (and indeed biblical) to think of the church, not the individual, as the one who is sent. This works out in a number of ways. Perhaps the church senses that God is sending it to, say, DR Congo to do church planting. The whole congregation are unlikely to move out to Kinshasa, but the church can be represented by a mission partner, whom they support, pray for and visit. There is only one person or family in Central Africa, but the whole church congregation is involved, through a mission agency. In a very real sense, it is the church who are sent to Africa. Equally, a church in the UK could sense that they are being sent to reach overseas students in their own city. The whole congregation could get involved in providing hospitality, English classes and staffing an overseas students' cafe. It happens. A church like this is far more involved in international mission than one which sends lots of mission partners

around the world and feels that this fulfils their commitment to overseas mission.

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