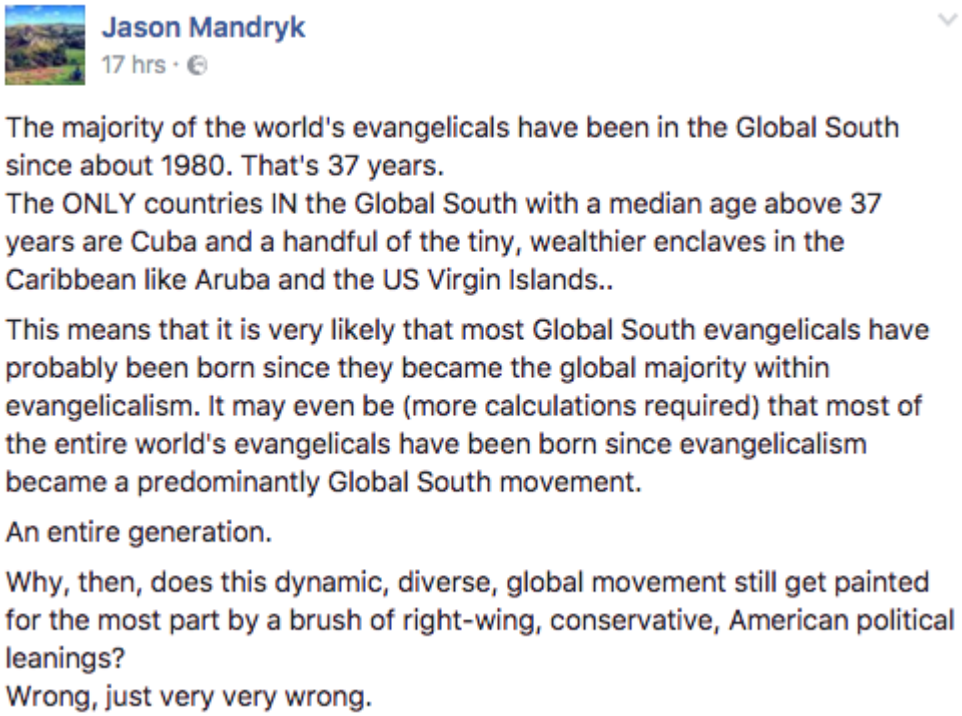
WE DON'T LOOK LIKE THAT!

Posted on February 23, 2017 by Eddie

If the church is young and based in the Global South, why are Evangelical Christians generally portrayed as middle aged, right-wingers?
Category: Church: World

Yesterday, my friend Jason Mandryk (of Operation World fame) posted this as his status on Facebook (I'm never sure how links work on Facebook, but here is his original post and comments, if it is available).



In essence, Jason is making two points. Firstly, the majority of evangelicals in the world are young and from the southern continents and secondly, that isn't the way they are portrayed in the media (and I would argue, it's not even the way most western evangelicals perceive the situation). I'd like to make a few reflections about why the perceptions are so often wrong.

I Blame the Media

It's very fashionable at the moment to blame the media for just about everything, but in this case, I do think there is some justification.Â The British media generally show a profound lack of knowledge, understanding and even interest about religious issues. It's not unusual to see the words evangelical, evangelist and evangelism confused and misused in the serious press and they don't do any better with other expressions of Christianity or other religions. The exposure I've had to media in other countries doesn't give me any confidence that they are more thoughtful on this subject than the Brits.

In the situation where the media are both uninterested in and ignorant of (hostile?) religious matters, it is understandable that they do not give a balanced picture of Christianity. Loud, media savvy, politically active right-wing American Christian groups capture the attention of world's media in a

way that Latins and Africans quietly living out their faith and seeing people come to Christ do not. The only time that the media notice the large majority of evangelical Christians is when some bonkers pastor either rips off his congregation to buy a private jet or tortures a child to cast out a demon. The picture of evangelicalism in our media is completely distorted. Good News is no news.

Money, Money, Money

The Western church, especially in the US is rich; very rich. If you are a Christian reading this in Europe or North America, that parable about camels and needles is about you (and me). This means that Christian music, publishing, media and travelling preachers are directedÂ from the West and serve the needs of Western ~~consumers~~ Christians. This means that the impression that the Evangelical church presents to the world is one of a body which is overwhelmingly white, middle class and with great hair and teeth. Where the rest of the world church is depicted, it is generally as a supplicant, unable to survive without financial donations from the West.

We Are Right

In the West Protestantism, church history tends to be taught as a linear process; from Jerusalem, to Rome and on into Europe, through the Reformation and then from Europe out to the world. There have been bumps along the road, but essentially the process has been one of refinement, leading to a mature form of Christianity. There are three problems with this approach. The first is that it ignores much of the glorious missionary history of the Church in Asia (and North Africa). The second is that it assumes that history will not move on from today and that modern Evangelicalism is the last word in Christian history (I'm sure medieval Catholics thought the same thing). But most importantly, it gives the impression that modern Western Evangelicalism is the normative form of Christianity that has to be exported to the world; that the rest of the world should listen to us and that they have nothing to teach us in return. I know no one would put it that crudely, but this is effectively the attitude of many ministries and agencies in the West. Sri Lankan theologian Vinoth Ramchandra railed against this sort of attitude in a blog post a while ago.

> *A group of North American pastors calling themselves The Gospel Coalition of International Outreach is engaged in what they call â€œa mission of Theological Famine Relief for the Global Churchâ€ . They state on their website: â€œWe are partnering with translators, publishers, and missions networks to provide new access to biblical resources, in digital and physical formats. Our goal is to strengthen thousands of congregations by helping to equip the pastors and elders who are called to shepherd them.â€*
>
> *Sounds loving, until one asks:Â whoÂ decides who is theologically famished and who is not?Â whoÂ selects what â€œresourcesâ€ to send the famished?Â whoÂ decides what constitutes â€œequippingâ€ and who should be doing it? The answer is always the same.*

> *A small group of white, well-to-do American or British males. We have experienced such paternalistic, colonial â€œmissionâ€ before- others deciding what is the â€œGood Newsâ€ for us, what is â€œsound doctrineâ€ , which authors to read and whom to avoid, etc. They have exported their theological blind-spots and sectarian rivalries, reproducing carbon-copies of themselves in the global South rather than nurturing real leaders. The learning and theological traffic is all one-way.*

As Christians in the West, we cannot do much about the way that global evangelicalism is portrayed in the media. The press will report the things that sell newspapers - though we can complain when we see inaccuracies. However, we can and we should make greater attempts to inform ourselves about the reality of the church in the world.Â This is no small undertaking; it isn't just about gathering information, it also involves acknowledging some of the wrong attitudes that we bring to the table and realising that we don't have the solutions to all of the world's problems. Above all, it means that we have to humbly see our place in the world and that we learn to receive from those that we've always envisaged as the targets of our generosity. Those of us in parts of the world where the church is static or in decline can ill afford to feel superior to those where the church is growing in leaps and bounds.

This does not, of course, imply that the Western church has nothing to give to the rest of the world. The church should be interdependent. It does, however, shape the way in which we seek to give.

Please note, this is a blog post; not an academic paper. I'm fully aware that what I've written is a series of generalisations and that it would be possible to find counter examples to just about everything I've said.Â That being said, I believe the essence of what I've written here is correct, albeit that it could be more nuanced.