WHAT DOES AFRICA REALLY NEED?

Posted on August 10, 2017 by Eddie

The bottom line is that we need each other and the church would be far healthier if we confessed our need of others rather than declaring that others need us.Â
Category: Observations

Yesterday, I complained about a white bloke saying what it was that Africa needed. Today, in an act of audacious hypocrisy, I'm going to give the definitive answer about Africa's needs - well sort of.

In case you missed it, yesterday's post was inspired by an article from the Gospel Coalition (GC) saying that Africa needed Western Missionaries and a response by Mekedes Hannis (MH) taking issue with the original article. I'll be quoting from both below.

Parts of the Whole

The GC article makes the following point.

> *In the new Republic of South Sudan, the Dinka and Neur (sic)Â peoples harbor generations-old animosity toward one another, whichÂ has fueled a civil war.Â It would be extremely difficult for a Dinka missionary to move into Neur territory with the gospel. Given this embattled history between people groups, then, an outsider has fewer barriers to overcome in orderÂ to gain a gospel platform.*

This is a bit of a generalisation, but the observation is true enough that we have to deal with it. There are times and places where it would be difficult for some Africans to work as cross-cultural missionaries. The problem is that the jump from this point to saying that, therefore, Western missionaries are needed is a very big one. OK, Dinka missionaries might not be welcome in Nuer country, but what about missionaries from Kenya, Uganda or Nigeria? The author doesn't seem to have considered that there are mission movements springing up across Africa with a desire to reach the unreached peoples of the continent.

But let's go with the idea that African missionaries aren't the right ones to reach the Nuer, or other similar groups; does that still imply that Westerners are the answer? The problem is that Western missionaries come with a fair bit of baggage as MH commented:

> *The article does not share facts about colonization and Africaâ€™s history of suffering in the hands of Westerners, which would make some Westerners unwelcome in some areas.*
>
> *The local pastors who are doing the real work really do not want Westerners there long term. However, they have learned that to get the resources they need they have to play nice with them, so they let them stay.*

You can add to this that there are places in Africa which are positively unsafe for Westerners to live and minister. It's all very well saying, as GC does, that we need people who are prepared to die for the Gospel, however, we definitely don't need outsiders who are willing to risk the lives of local Christians. There are places where Asian and Latin Christians are much better equipped because of history and contemporary geo-politics than Westerners. We need to be humble and recognise that.

How can we facilitate the growing mission movements in those countries?

This isn't saying that there isn't a place for Western missionaries. There most certainly is, but it is as part of a much larger pattern. To be honest, I'm happy with the title of the GC article. I do think that Africa needs western workers, but equally, the West needs Africans, Latins and Asians. The church is meant to be interdependent and we all need each other and long as we think that we are the only ones with something to contribute, we really haven't grasped what God is doing in the world today.

Attitude

The GC article is a well intentioned call for people to get involved in mission. On that level, it is fine. However, it is also an article written by a westerner, for westerners about the needs of Africans without any input from Africans. It is not surprising that MH responds strongly to a negative picture being painted by an outsider:

> *Starting from the introduction, the TGC article paints such a dark and desolate picture of Africa that I wondered if I was reading aboutÂ my Africa. I quickly decided that this was a Westernerâ€™sÂ idea of Africa, which was a very offensive, unwelcome and disrespectful portrayal of the continent...*
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> *This type of thinking of missions is the perfect example of when helping hurts. The TGC article diagnoses Africaâ€™s problem asÂ savages that need civilizationÂ ...*
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> *I think it is very problematic thatÂ The Gospel CoalitionÂ is allowing a Westerner to diagnose Africaâ€™s problem as a lack of Westerners and offer a solution that says Africa needs more Westerners. It is offensive, to say the least, and does not even touch the tip of the iceberg.*

It could well be that the original author had not intention of being as negative as this and would be shocked by the comments. However, when outsiders talk about other people and their situation, their comments often come across much more strongly than originally intended and a mission agency leader should have known that. Whatever the intention, the article was insensitive and offensive. Unfortunately, it is not unusual for Westerners to talk about other parts of the world in this sort of way. As MH says:

> *... it just talks as if Westerners somehow are a spiritual authority over the ENTIRE CONTINENT. (Emphasis in the original.)*

I'm not sure that we ever have the right to talk about other parts of the world in this sort of way, but if we do, we also have to give African Christians the right to talk about us and to diagnose our problems. I know from experience that it is pretty uncomfortable listening to African leaders talk about the spiritual dryness that they find in many British churches. What would they say about the

materialism of Churches in the West or the way that much of American Evangelicalism has bought into a rather nasty nationalistic rhetoric? We in the West should be slow to talk about the speck of dust in the African church's eye, while we are refusing to deal with the plank in our own.

We shouldn't be talking about one another, we should be talking to each other. Outsiders do have insights into our situation and we should welcome them, but those insights are only valuable when they are shared with humility and an understanding which comes from dialogue and real relationships.

The bottom line is that we need each other and the church would be far healthier if we confessed our need of others rather than declaring that others need us.

Tomorrow I might talk about the Prosperity Gospel - if I dare!