IS A SHOEBOX ENOUGH?

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How should churches respond to the needs of the world at Christmastime?
Categories: Church: UK, Church: World

It's that time of year; families all over the UK will be heading out to the shops to buy some appropriate, small presents, packing them into a shoebox and taking them to church for distribution to needy folks all around the world.

There is something very attractive about the shoebox model. It is simple, it allows the whole family to participate - teaching children valuable lessons about generosity and the results are easy to see and to appreciate.

But...

It is not my aim to criticise the shoebox approach (though such criticisms can be made) my concern is about whether shoeboxes stuffed with gifts are an appropriate or adequate response to the Incarnation of the Son of God.

Let's just get a bit of context.

- Today, 86% of the worlds Muslims, Buddhists and Hindus do not know a Christian believer.
- Even though the church is growing rapidly around the world, the population of the planet is growing even faster. In percentage terms, the Christian church is losing ground.

These are facts which should be of a major concern to Evangelical Christians and as we come to Christmas we should remember that we are sent into the world to announce the Good News in the same way that the Father sent Christ to us. Surely it is appropriate that in addition to providing help to poor people, we should also take steps to ensure that the unreached people of the world, those who currently have no opportunity to hear about Jesus, can share the wonder of the gospel.

Again, let me emphasise, I'm not saying that churches shouldn't collect shoeboxes. However, I do think that there are other things that we can and should be doing, which should perhaps have a higher priority. So, if you or your church are looking for some projects that you could adopt this Christmas, here are some ideas.

- Covenant to pray for an unreached people group. Make a point of learning about the people, their culture and their background and praying over the next year that the Gospel would reach them.
- Send a missionary to an unreached people group. This might be beyond the capacity of an individual church, but a group of churches could get together to identify, equip and support someone to take the message of Jesus to one of the hard places in the world. Failing that, you could contact a mission agency to find a missionary who needs more prayer and financial support and get behind them.
- Sponsor the translation of the Bible into a new language.
- Organise a training course to help your congregation to reach out to their muslim neighbours.

The disadvantage of these sorts of projects is that they are all long-term and lack the immediate

appeal of the shoebox approach, but they have the capacity to have a much deeper impact than short-term generosity.

If you are interested in supporting work among unreached people, there are a number of mission agencies which specialise in this sort of work. I have had close involvement with the following agencies and strongly recommend them, but there are plenty of others, that are worth considering, too.

- Wycliffe Bible Translators
- Frontiers
- OMF
- WEC
- Mission Africa

Filling out shoeboxes is good, but our response to the needs of the world can not and should not stop there.

> *But how can they call on him to save them unless they believe in him? And how can they believe in him if they have never heard about him? And how can they hear about him unless someone tells them?*