THINGS HOME MISSION CAN LEARN: CONTEXTUALISE

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Category: Church: UK

During our time living among the Kouya, I was regularly called on to preach in church - people didn't really think that Bible translation kept me busy enough. It became obvious, pretty quickly, that the way I'd learned to preach in the UK wasn't going to cut the mustard in rural Ivory Coast. The logical three-point (alliterated) sermon gave way to a more narrative form and I soon realised that I needed to be far more overt in talking about the spiritual realm - bush spirits, witchcraft etc., than I would have been in the UK (more of this in a later post).

The point is, I had to learn to contextualise. There are lots of definitions of contextualisation out there and I'll give some reading suggestions below to help those who want to know more. In this post, I want to adopt a simple definition, addressing the issues that concern people in a way that communicates to them.

Now, I realise that to some people contextualisation is a bad word, it smacks of "watering down the Gospel". Let me say a couple of things to address this:

- Christianity is always contextualised. Always! The way in which people in the UK (of whichever church tradition) meet together, pray, sing and preach bears little resemblance to the way in which first century Christians met. The same elements may be there, but they have changed and developed over the centuries as culture has shifted.
- Paul was a master of contextualisation and we would be wise to learn from him. Just compare his sermons in Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13) and Athens (Acts 17), he adopts a completely different approach when preaching to a mainly Jewish audience and one composed of Greek philosophers.

What does contextualisation look like in the UK?

Firstly, it means we have to address the issues that concern people. How do we know what concerns them? Read yesterday's post. When Paul spoke to a Jewish audience, he started off with the story of the Jewish nation, when speaking to Greeks, he worked from inscriptions on statues and Greek poetry. What are the things that concern, interest or motivate the people you are trying to reach?

Let me get a little controversial here. If your "gospel" message is simply "Jesus died on the cross so that your sins will be forgiven", you are unlikely to get much of a hearing. Yes, this message is true and people need to understand it, but there are a variety of reasons why it's probably not the right place to start, today in the UK.

Although we don't recognise it, Christians use the word "sin" in a technical sense, which is different to the way that people outside of the church use it (where it generally refers to sex). So when you talk about forgiveness of sins, your hearers are understanding something very different to what you are intending. To be honest, guilt and the need for forgiveness are not high on the agenda for most Brits; a message which offers this is not going to get a lot of traction.

Let me repeat for the easily offended; yes, people do need to be forgiven and sin is a dreadful thing - whatever people happen to think.

Loneliness, alienation, worry about children, living in an uncertain world; these are the sorts of issues that people are concerned about today and the Bible has a fair bit to say about all of them. Show how Jesus speaks into these issues and how reconciliation with God through Christ on the cross is ultimately the only lasting answer to these sorts of things. The issue of the need for forgiveness will emerge out of these sorts of discussions.

The second strand of contextualisation is that we need to address people in a way that they will hear what we say. In most British contexts the age of the half-hour long evangelistic sermon has probably passed. It's not that people can't listen for that long, it's just that they won't. Conversational forms of evangelism such as Christianity Explored and Alpha are much more effective because they engage people in a culturally appropriate way. Likewise, short, pithy talks that end with a question are far more likely to get people thinking about the message and coming back for more than long expositions which try to cover every possible angle of the gospel in one go.

There are two keys to this sort of approach. First we have to focus on the listener and what they will listen to and what they will understand. Secondly, we have to realise that mission is a long, slow business; you don't have to say everything at once, but you do want people to come back and hear more at a future date.

So what can your friendly mission partner contribute in this sort of situation? Again, I'm not convinced that most people who have lived outside of the UK for a decade or more really understand the UK culture well enough to give specific advice. But if they have learned to contextualise in another context, they may well have a wealth of stories and advice that will help you to think through the issues that you face in the UK. Have a chat to them and find out what they did.

Posts In This Series

- Introduction:Â I believe that the skills and experience of cross-cultural missionaries are crucial to the future of the church in the UK: the start of a blog series....
- Go:Â When push comes to shove, there is one basic difference between long-term, cross-cultural missionaries and the average church member. ...
- Study:Â How well do we understand the culture that surrounds us?...
- Contextualise:Â When Paul spoke to a Jewish audience, he started off with the story of the Jewish nation, when speaking to Greeks, he worked from inscriptions on statues and Greek poetry. ...
- Serve:Â If you just preach the word but donâ€™t do the deeds then you are not credible, if you just do the deeds without preaching the word then you are not audible....
- Don't Look Down: Looking down on a class of people, and holding them in contempt for their

reading habits, has far more to do with liberal, middle-class prejudice than it has to do with Christianity.Â ...

- Speak:Â To a newcomer, a phrase such as "we will now enter into a time of worship" conveys far more background information about the person using it than it does about what is going to happen next in the service. ...
- Religion:Â Learn from people who have been there and done that....
- Stories:Â Taking one of Jesus' amazingly creative parables and turning it into an alliterated, three-point, logical sermon has to be the ultimate in literate processing. ...
- Pray:Â It would be easy - very easy - for a Western rationalist to dismiss all of this. I'm a biologist, I know what causes diseases! ...