STEP INTO THE FUTURE

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Category: Observations

Yesterday, I came across this on Twitter:

> *Nearly all agencies sending foreign Christian workers to China report a downturn in recruits. Inside China, meanwhile, the indigenous church is ramping up efforts to mobilize a new generation of cross-cultural workers to take the gospel beyond Chinaâ€™s borders. @BrentSFulton*
>
> *â€" ChinaSource (@ChinaSourceOrg) February 5, 2018*

Just let what it is saying sink in for a moment. The number of Western missionaries going to China is decreasing, meanwhile China is gearing up to send an increasing number of missionaries out into the wider world. In fact, exactly the same thing could be said across Asia, in Africa and in Latin America. The shape of the world missionary force is changing, and changing fast.

If, when you hear the word missionary, you automatically think of someone from Europe or the USA, then your stereotype is already out of date and becoming even more so very quickly.

In passing, I just want to draw your attention to this follow on tweet which says something that I've said a number of times on Kouyanet:

> *The key to the Western churchâ€™s ongoing effectiveness may well be its ability to learn from majority-world believers, many of whom know what it means to be salt and light in the face of political and cultural restrictions. @BrentSFulton*
>
> *â€" ChinaSource (@ChinaSourceOrg) February 5, 2018*

Anyway, back to mission. Today's mission force is diverse, multinational and multicultural. Old stereotypes need to be ditched and we need to embrace a new reality.

However, even shifting our understanding of what missionaries are like and where they come from is not going far enough. The main way that the Christian gospel has spread around the world has always been through "ordinary people", not through "professional missionaries". Local believers are the most important evangelists in their home regions. Initial converts may be won by missionaries, but the spread and growth of the church is dependant on the witness of of people from within the culture. It's also important to realise that it isn't just missionaries who take the gospel across cultural boundaries; migration and trade have always been important tools for the spread of the Christian message.

Winston Churchill is said to have written that "history is told by by the victors". Mission history is told by missionaries and by people who support them and the picture we get of how the gospel has spread around the world is a distorted one which plays down the role of the "non-professionals". The

same thing is still true today.

This is not to say that missionaries and mission organisations don't have a role to play. They do. They are part of the complex picture of the way that God is working in the world today. But they are only a part of the picture, not the whole thing.

So what?

Missionary agencies need to work much harder to give an overall picture of what God is doing in the world and the myriad of ways in which he is working. If we give the impression that the world cannot do without our agencies, or that God is dependant on the Western church to get the gospel out into the wider world, we are doing no one any favours. There is nothing quite so depressing as a missionary agency which believes its own publicity.

Secondly, if we are going to talk about the future of mission, we need to have representatives of that future (and increasingly, the present) in the room. I've sat in too many meetings where middle aged white guys (and a small proportion of women) have debated, strategised and planned for the future without any representation from the majority world church. The world has changed massively and it's not just our strategies that have to reflect this; the people doing the strategising and planning need to change too.