NO, WE SHOULDN'T SEND MISSIONARIES... UNLESS

Posted on April 9, 2018 by Eddie

The Church in the global south needs the church in the UK, and we in the UK need our brothers and sisters in the rest of the world. Our problem, is that we are slow to realise our need.

Category: Observations

Quite a few people on my social media timelines have shared an article by Andy Harker entitled "Do We Really Need To Send Missionaries Overseas?". Given that Harker is writing for the website of an agency which exists in order to send missionaries abroad, it is no surprise that he answers the question in the title of his article in the affirmative. In fact, he doesn't really engage with the question at all, none of the problematic issues associated with overseas missions such as the dangers of dependency or the export of Western cultural dominance under the guise of the gospel are addressed. A better title might have been four reasons why we should should send missionaries overseas.

Now please don't get me wrong, I don't actually disagree with anything that Harker says. He makes a number of good points and makes them well. It's a good short read. However, there are some aspects of the question that he raises that he didn't have the space to address and I'd like to briefly look at one of them, which I think helps to put Harker's points into a broader context.

Harker's fourth point is:

> *The ideal for the global church is not independency but interdependency. Like the circulation of the blood in the body â€“ it is healthy for there to be a circulation of Christians around the body of the church. Each part of the body will be simultaneously strong and weak in different ways - the goal is mutual encouragement (Romans 1:12).*
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> *Some mutual learning can happen at a distance but there is nothing like actually being with and working together in gospel ministry. Much glory goes to God and much growth occurs and much learning happens as people of different cultures interact and serve.*

To which I say a hearty amen. However, the article only talks about the flow of missionaries from the UK to the rest of the world - where is the interdependence? Given the way that the church is thriving in some quarters of the world while it struggles in the UK, we need to be actively thinking about the UK receiving missionaries as well as sending them.

Now at this point, people often reply that the church in the UK is rich and has a wealth of material and theological resources that we should share with the world. I heartily agree; but we have to see this in context.

The first point I'd make is that we can't let our strengths blind us to our own weakness. We are quite quick to point to the failings of churches in other parts of the world (prosperity Gospel etc), without noticing the degree to which the church in the UK has compromised with materialistic, post-enlightenment culture. We have things to learn from Christians in other parts of the world, just as they have from us.

Secondly, we shouldn't be too sure that our prescription for the rest of the world is the right one. Sri

Lankan theologian Vinoth Ramchandra is scathing about the way in which western churches attempt to impose their views and their approach on Christians in other parts of the world (emphasis mine):

> *Sounds loving, until one asks: who decides who is theologically famished and who is not? who selects what â€œresourcesâ€ to send the famished? who 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.***

Andy Harker is absolutely right; we need each other. The Church in the global south needs the church in the UK, and we in the UK need our brothers and sisters in the rest of the world. Our problem, is that we are slow to realise our need. If we don't understand this need for interdependence then we have nothing to offer the rest of the world.

I realise that there are all sorts of practical issues tied up in this which I haven't addressed - but my point is really about attitude. Do we take interdependence seriously, or do we just see ourselves as rich, with no need of receiving from others. Another church thought that in the past and it didn't end well.

I hasten to point out, that these remarks were prompted by the article I mentioned at the start, they are not a response to it. My remarks are generalisations about the situation in the UK, not a comment about any particular church, agency or individual - though to some extent they are addressed at me.Â