GETTING THE BALANCE BETWEEN WORLD AND LOCAL MISSION

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Category: Observations

It's a difficult thing to say, butÂ getting a vision for local evangelism can be deadly to a church's support for world mission.

OK, before people write in to complain, let me add a bit more detail.

Firstly, I approve of local evangelism; churches have a responsibility to reach out into their communities with the gospel - I'm all for it. I'm also (surprise, surprise) in favour of world mission, too. However, I realise that churches and church leaders only have limited capacity to do stuff and most of them have far more on their plate than they can handle. There will always be tensions in church life between what the church could be doing and what it actually has the capacity to do. The tension between world mission and local evangelism is just one example of the balancing act that leaders are continually called to carry out.

When a church really grasps the need for evangelism in its local community, it can be all consuming. There are good reasons for this, the church leaders and members are confronted by the spiritual needs of their communities every time they turn on the television, step out of their front doors or go to work. By contrast, the concerns and needs of people on the other side of the globe seem - well - on the other side of the globe. When resources are stretched it is far easier to concentrate on the pressing, local needs than to think about the complexities of cross-cultural mission half a world away. I've seen this dynamic played out in many different churches that I've visited and spoken at over the years. There is a little bit of me that gets very frustrated when I see that a church is highly motivated for local evangelism, because I know that in all likelihood, my area of concern will be downplayed.

Let me quickly underline that I don't think the appropriate response is to stop focussing on evangelism in the church's locality. However, I don't think that the answer lies in developing new programmes or strategies to balance evangelism and mission. Nor do I think that renaming local evangelism as "home mission" actually solves the problem - though it can help.

Rather than look at new strategies and ideas to balance two different activities, we need to turn the issue on its head and start to think theologically.

- Firstly, mission isn't primarily about what we do, it is something that God has been doing since creation; reaching out to his world in order to reconcile all things in Christ. God has one mission and issues of geography don't come into it.
- Even if we do focus on human activity the classic texts about mission in the Bible (Matthew 28:19,-20, John 20:21, Acts 1:8) make it plain that mission takes place in different places in the world, but, crucially, in each text, the activity (Matthew: making disciples, John: being like Jesus, Acts: witnessing to Jesus) doesn't change according to location. Mission has the same goals in Leeds or Lagos.

There are some pragmatic differences, mission work in, say, North Africa, involves travel and

language and culture learning which may not be the case for mission in Northumberland. Though, increasingly mission to the UK needs the same skills and training as classic cross-cultural mission (see more here). However, there is only one mission and that involves sharing Christ with people in the UK; Brits, diaspora communities, overseas students and people across the world. Using language such as "evangelism" and "world mission" or even "home mission" and "global mission" is not particularly helpful (even though I do it a fair bit) as it creates a distinction that doesn't really exist. I am convinced (and I could cite examples) that when a church really grasps that God has one mission which encompasses the whole world (including your home city) and gets excited about that mission, then both "home mission" and "world mission" will thrive. However, when we distinguish between them, one will always suffer.