CHURCHES DON'T CARE ABOUT MISSION

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Just because a church doesn't share your interests, it doesn't mean that they don't have a concern for world mission.
Category: Observations

This is a complaint that I hear regularly from people who are professionally involved in promoting world mission. The accusation is levelled against individual churches, groups of churches and sometimes as a blanket condemnation of the church as a whole. For what it's worth, I beg to differ. It's not that everything in the garden is rosy, it isn't. However, I've never met an evangelical church leader who had no interest in world mission and who didn't wish that his church was doing more in this area. However, I have met a number of church leaders who resent what they see as pressure - bullying even - by mission agencies to be involved in their area of mission.

One of the key differences between agencies and churches (and there are many) is that agencies have a restricted set of interests. If you talk to someone from OMF, you will quickly find that they are passionate about Christian work in Asia, talk to someone from Wycliffe and Bible Translation is likely to crop up in the conversation. Each agency has its speciality; this may be a geographic area or it may be a particular form of ministry - but they don't try and do everything. There is one specialisation that I'd like to mention, in particular. This is the whole question of reaching Unreached People Groups. UPGs, as the jargon goes, are used by some to define the highest priorities in mission work - the implication being that if you aren't interested in UPGs then you aren't doing real work. The problem is that what was intended as a tool to help identify priority areas is, all too often, used as a stick to beat churches with. It is important to realise that there is nothing sacred about UPGs. They emerge out of a particular modern social theory and attempts to align modern definitions of socio-linguistic groups with Biblical notions of "nations" is at best anachronistic. They are a useful tool - a specialisation for some missions - but they are no more than that. We should all share Paul's desire to preach the Gospel where it is not heard and the UPG approach might help. However, to somehow imply (as I have heard) that reaching council estates in the North of England should not be a priority because Britain is "reached" (which means that a sociologist somewhere in the US has declared it to be reached) shows a distressing lack of knowledge about the North of England and a far higher level of trust in sociological sciences than they deserve.

The point is that mission agencies all have things that they focus on. These are valid things, right things and important things, but they are only part of the big picture. Churches, on the other hand, have to have a much wider focus than agencies. Worship, the sacraments, teaching the Scriptures - the whole bit of being a church is one part of their focus. Then they are called to reach out locally, regionally, nationally and to the whole world. They have a wider range of things on their plate than an individual agency. It is not surprising then, that they may not share the enthusiasm for a particular place or ministry that is shown by mission agencies and reps. It is quite possible for a church to be very engaged in world mission but to have no interest in Bible Translation (shocking, I know) and Wycliffe needs to understand this.

Just because a church doesn't share your interests, it doesn't mean that they don't have a concern for world mission. Agency leaders and reps need to listen to church leaders, to understand their struggles and the constraints they face rather than just try and sell their product.

Yes, churches could always do more. They might even be able to work with and support your agency, but they are far more likely to do that if you come in with a supportive and listening approach.