THE MODERN MISSION MOVEMENT: PUBLICATIONS

Posted on July 12, 2018 by Eddie

From Carey's Enquiry to agency Twitter feeds;
thoughts about mission communication.
Category: Observations

This is the fourth in my series of posts looking at the way in which Micheal Stroope characterises the modern mission movement in his excellent bookÂ Transcending Mission: The Eclipse Of A Modern Tradition. For once in this series, there is likely to be nothing particularly controversial.

Publications of various types have played a key role in the promotion of mission work for over 200 years. Many people date the start of the modern mission movement from the publication of Carey's "Enquiry". In this 1792 book (the full title of which is about two lines long), William Carey made the biblical case for world mission, gave a lot of details about the state of mission at that time and then made concrete suggestions for a method of organising mission work. Carey's suggestions eventually gave birth to the Baptist Missionary Society and the rest, as they say, is history.

Andrew Walls suggests that through the 19th century, missionary magazines were extremely important in sustaining interest in mission work. These magazines, which were not produced by the mission agencies themselves, had circulations which rivalled those of the news magazines of the day. They not only gave information about the work of mission, but they also helped disseminate information about world geography and different cultures in an age before radio and television.

Into the twentieth century, two forms of communication stand out: missionary biographies and agency magazines. Books such as By Searching by Isobel Kuhn and Through Gates of Splendour by Elizabeth Elliot inspired many people, myself included, to get involved in mission work. Meanwhile, agencies promoted their own activities by publishing magazines full of stories of work in exotic places which encouraged the public to get involved in mission through prayer, supporting missionaries or even going overseas themselves. This is often referred to as Give, Pray, Go. Many of these magazines had far larger circulations than the general Christian press, no doubt helped by the fact that they were distributed free of charge by the agencies. Therein lies a problem.

Over the last thirty years or so, the world of publishing has changed dramatically. Whereas a simple black-and-white magazine would have been appropriate a few decades ago, today's situation calls for full-colour publications with a complex layout and agency branding. The problem is, that these things don't come cheap. As a result, most agencies have cut down the frequency with which they publish their magazine and in some cases, they have ceased to distribute paper publications altogether. A great deal of mission publication has gone online. Websites, blogs, Twitter, Facebook and Instagram have taken the place of more traditional forms of publication. In some ways, this is a great help to the more sophisticated agencies; by analysing their web traffic, they can see which sorts of stories and web pages are of most interest and which generate a response. This is particularly relevant to those agencies which are involved in a lot of fundraising; they want to know what is most likely to get punters to part with their cash. Sorry if that sounds cynical.

In closing, I'd just like to throw out a few comments about the impact of mission publicity online. These are in no particular order and some are more significant and well researched than others.

- Having a sophisticated online presence doesn't necessarily mean that people will take notice of you. Some of the larger agencies' active and well thought through Twitter and Facebook pages have relatively few followers. Often, the agency director's personal account will have more followers than the official agency account. This may be because people like to follow individuals rather than organisations, or it could be because the agency directors' accounts are more interesting than the tightly curated stuff which the agency produces.
- I wouldn't accuse mission agencies of "fake news", however, online communications tend to lack the sort of nuance and discussion that is needed in an age when mission and the world church are changing. It is far easier to make a simple (simplified?) claim about aÂ successful mission enterprise than it is to discuss whether that particular enterprise has long-term benefits or might even do some harm. Twitter and Instagram only exacerbate this problem.
- In an online world, it is easy to give an impression that you are bigger than you really are. Having spent a vast amount of time trawling through agency websites as part of my research, I have been struck by how many tiny agencies (one man and a dog - and the dog is part-time) have a very impressive online presence.

Perhaps I did have something controversial to say, after all!