THE MODERN MISSIONARY MOVEMENT: LOW ENTRY THRESHOLD

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It is in the agency's interest to make it as easy as possible for people to get involved in mission. This is a good thing - but it does have a dark side.
Category: Observations

This is the fifth in my series of posts looking at Michael Stroope's description of the modern missionary movement in his bookÂ Â Transcending Mission: The Eclipse Of A Modern Tradition.

> *â€œâ€¦funding mission through pledges and offerings provides opportunity for wide voluntary participation and thus a low threshold for â€œjoiningâ€ the movement. No matter how small the amount or infrequent the contribution, participation in the cause can occur for anyone.â€ (p.325)*

Stroope's contention is that mission agencies make it as easy as possible for people to participate in mission work. As I mentioned in yesterday's post, mission publicity tends to have a simple message based around the themes of give, pray and go.

In essence, this is all pretty simple. Mission agency magazines and websites have donation forms so that people can give regular or one-off gifts. Most agencies publish some sort of prayer calendar which encourages people to pray for their work on a regular basis and no mission publication or Twitter feed would be complete without mentioning opportunities to serve God around the world on a short or long-term basis (though these rarely mention that you won't get a salary in these jobs).

First of all, let me say that I am all in favour of people getting involved in mission work. If it wasn't for the churches and individuals who have faithfully prayed for us and supported us financially over the last thirty years, we wouldn't have been able to do what it is that we do. Even when I was Executive Director of Wycliffe Bible Translators, I didn't receive a salary and relied on friends and churches for our income. However, as readers of this series will have come to expect, I do have some problems with this idea of a low entry corridor.

The first is that sometimes it is too easy for people to become missionaries. As a leader on the mission field, my biggest headaches were caused by people who should never have been there in the first place. It's not that they were bad people, but they didn't have theÂ inner resilience required to survive and thrive a long way from home in a culture very different to their own. As a result, their behaviour could at times be "difficult". These things could and should have been spotted in their own country. Better to turn down a potential missionary candidate than store up trouble for their field leadership down the road. As one of my colleagues used to say, "the missionary attrition rate is not high enough".

A second issue is the question of data. It is not just Facebook, the Russians and Cambridge Analytica who want to get hold of your name and email address, mission agencies do too. Agencies want to turn people who browse their website into one time donors and they want to turn one time donors into regular supporters. This might sound cynical, but without regular supporters agencies simply can't survive. They want to have your information so that they can send you magazines or financial appeals. Of course, the recent GDPR hoo-ha has stopped the most egregious abuses of this sort of

thing, but it is worth remembering that the purpose of the glossy magazines and such like is to get you more deeply involved in the work of the agency. This is not always a bad thing, I wish far more people would get involved in supporting mission. But if you are already sacrificially supporting agency A, dramatic appeals from agency B can sometimes feel manipulative. And then there is my biggest problem with all of this.

The way in which agencies draw people into involvement with them completely circumvents the local church. God's primary engine for mission in this world is the local gathered congregation of believers and we should not subvert this. However, that is exactly what agencies do in their publicity and recruitment. I've said things like this before and met a degree of resistance from some (but not all) agency leaders. I am told that agencies respect the local church and value their partnerships with churches. However, when I look at agency magazines, websites, Facebook pages, and Twitter feeds, I find them to be full of attractive appeals for individuals to be involved with the agency and virtually no reference to the role of the church in this.

Certainly, if people apply to join an agency, their local church will get involved in the candidacy process, but that often comes a few steps down the line after the agency and individual have already spoken. However, if an individual wants to get involved in praying for an agency or supporting them financially, no reference will be made to the local church at all. It is next to impossible for a local congregation to have a thought through and coherent approach to mission support, when agencies are working hard to get individuals from that congregation to support them.

I honestly believe that most agency leaders take the idea of partnership with the church seriously. However, I also believe that they are so caught up in the current individualistic model of mission that they don't see the impact that the way they work has on churches. The issue runs right across the mission sector and probably needs to be addressed on a wider basis than the individual agency or church. Whether a suitable forum exists is another issue.

Before people get upset at me for this post, I fully realise that I am generalising. There are some honourable exceptions to what I've said above (but not many).