THE MISSIONARY MOVEMENT: CONFERENCES

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Some thoughts about mission, conferences and cash for access!
Category: Observations

This is the sixth in my series of posts on the features of the modern missionary movement mentioned by Michael Stroope in his excellent bookÂ Transcending Mission: The Eclipse Of A Modern Tradition.

> *â€œmission conferences are platforms to recite the progress and triumphs of the modern mission movement and thus reinforce the traditionâ€™s narrative. The mission enthuses those present, flags of nations line the walls and stage, and tales of exploits and victories are recounted. In this manner, speakers and organizers promote tenets of the movement and reinforce solidarity with its participants.â€ Â (p.326)*

To be honest, I think this is more an American thing than a British or European one. On this side of the Atlantic, there is currently nothing substantial that operates in the same way as the Urbana conference in the US. The nearest we have in the UK is Bangor Worldwide in Northern Ireland and a much smaller operation called GoFest and an Urbana type conference on the continent, MissionNet recently cancelled its major event. However, in my limited experience, these European events look very different from their American counterparts - possibly because they tend to be run on a much smaller budget! There are also various "professional" mission conferences, but these tend not to be aimed at the general public and so don't really fit here.

That isn't to say that mission is entirely missing from the UK conference agenda. Many mission agencies organise supporters' conferences which to some extent fit the description in the quote above. However, these conferences tend to focus on one or perhaps two agencies, rather than on the mission movement as a whole. However, the main way in which mission hits the stage in the UK is through the big, set-piece, conferences such as Spring Harvest, Keswick and New Wine all of which tend to have some sort of mission focus on the main stage. In these settings, the mission input tends to be of one of three types:

- A missionary speaker. Sometimes, the conference will organise for a speaker with a mission background to speak at the mission event. However, conference organisers are aware of the need to pull in the public to the meetings and there are a limited number of missionaries in the UK who are big enough names to draw in the crowds (and most of them are not in the first flush of youth).
- Given the lack of big-name missionary speakers, it is not unusual for conferences to have one of the main speakers give a missionary talk. I've blogged about this before, with a follow up here. In my experience, these sessions can be quite good, but equally, they can be excruciating for anyone who has a grasp of the world situation today. I have heard big-name speakers give impassionedÂ talks on mission from the stage of famous conferences that were just about irrelevant to the world we live in today. What a missed opportunity!
- The third way in which mission gets a look in at conferences is when one of the big Christian

aid and development groups actually co-sponsors the event (evangelistic missions don't have that sort of money - which ought to be an issue for us). They will take some of the conference speakers and organisers on a trip overseas (often to East Africa) and film an exciting video which will then be used at the conference as a part of an appeal for the work of the agency. It could just be that I am cynical, or that I work for an agency which doesn't have this sort of money, but I have to say that I find this sort of paying for exposure to be rather distasteful.