MISSION AGENCIES AND THE FUTURE

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Todayâ€™s missionaries are refugees witnessing to Christ in tent cities across the globe, Philipino taxi drivers sharing their faith as they drive their cabs in the cities of the Middle East, Chinese businessmen working in Africa, African students at universities in secular Europe, Brazilian church planters in Asia and British believers serving under local church leadership in Latin America.
Category: Observations

A few months ago, I wrote this article for Catalyst Magazine, which is produced by BMS World Mission. You can read my words below, but you really should go and check out the whole edition because there is some really good stuff in there. In truth,

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Thirty years ago, my wife and I, along with our one-year-old son, moved into a village in the centre of CÃ´te dâ€™Ivoire, to start learning the local language and culture, so that we could join a Bible translation project. You could tell we were missionaries; we tried to help people as much as we could, we worked hard to fit in with the local culture and we participated in the life of the small village church. Oh, and we were the only white people in the village and (despite thinking of ourselves as not very well off) we were far richer than anyone else around. We were part of a movement that stretches back to William Carey, and, short of wearing a pith helmet and dubious khaki shorts, we couldnâ€™t have fit the missionary stereotype more if weâ€™d tried.

Three decades on and missionaries look very different. They may be white, but then again, they probably arenâ€™t. They may be rich, or they may not be, and they certainly wonâ€™t be wearing a pith helmet. Todayâ€™s missionaries are refugees witnessing to Christ in tent cities across the globe, Philipino taxi drivers sharing their faith as they drive their cabs in the cities of the Middle East, Chinese businessmen working in Africa, African students at universities in secular Europe, Brazilian church planters in Asia and British believers serving under local church leadership in Latin America.

I realise that some people might question that last paragraph; refugees, cab drivers, businessmen and students might well be sharing Christ with people, but they arenâ€™t really missionaries. However, all this does is raise the question of what we mean when we use the term missionary, or mission, for that matter. Weâ€™ve become accustomed to thinking of mission as something we do; an intentional, action to share the love of Christ in word and deed. By the same logic, missionaries are people who deliberately cross-cultural boundaries in order to share Jesus with others. The problem with this sort of approach is that misses out on so much of what God is doing in the world; itâ€™s not just the professionals who are taking the message of Jesus to the world.

Over recent years, weâ€™ve started to think of mission in terms of Godâ€™s actions in the world, rather than as something that we do. God calls us to participate in *his* mission, rather than just leaving us to get on with it. When we look at mission in perspective, we realise that mission is far bigger than we had ever imagined. People are moving around the globe in unprecedented numbers and God is using these movements to take the Good News to all corners of the world. The number of Christians who are moving to new situations for study, to search for better opportunities in life or because they are refugees far exceeds the number of traditional missionaries. We might be reluctant to call these people â€œmissionariesâ€ , but they are a part of Godâ€™s mission to our world and we need to recognise that. To be honest, there is nothing surprising here. Christianity has always spread through the organic, unsung witness of ordinary believers as much as through the

influence of missionaries, pastors and others. There is another aspect to this movement of people that we need to consider: millions of people who would be unlikely to hear about Jesus in their home situation are moving to countries where they can encounter the Gospel for the first time. After decades of missionary activity in the Middle East, we are now seeing significant numbers of Iranians being baptised as believers, but in the UK, not in their home country. Godâ€™s mission to the world is much broader and diverse than the missionary movement that we are familiar with. Not only that, but it is growing and becoming increasingly diverse as time moves on.

So, what does this have to do with us? The first thing is that we need to humbly re-evaluate our place in what God is doing around the world. Britain has a magnificent missionary history and we can reel off the names of heroes of the faith who came from these islands; William Carey, James Hudson Taylor, C.T. Studd, Amy Carmichael and the list goes on. However, we must not allow this wonderful history to determine our future. We simply arenâ€™t as important to the world mission movement as we once were or as we might like to think we are. We have to be prepared to learn from others and to take a lead from the innovations that Christians in other parts of the world are coming up with rather than expecting that we will be the ones in charge. This also means that we need to be careful in our use of finance. Whatever the state of the church in the UK, we are still a relatively wealthy nation and if we are not careful, we can use our money to force our agenda on others without even realising that we are doing so.

When you put all of the current trends together, it is clear that mission agencies, such as BMS, are facing an existential crisis. They came into existence in order to take the gospel from Christian Britain to the rest of the world. However, in the last two hundred years, the UK has become less Christian, while the church has grown in much of the rest of the world (partly in response to the success of the mission movement). History has moved on, leaving agencies facing in the wrong direction. However, there is a further, hidden problem. Although church attendance in the UK has been in decline for a long period of time, the number of mission agencies has continued to increase. A growing number of agencies are looking to find recruits and a supporter base from a shrinking pool of Christians. This is simply not sustainable, even in the short-term and agencies need to grasp this nettle and work together if they are to survive.

This doesnâ€™t mean that there is no place for missionaries from the UK. There is, because Christians and churches are to be interdependent. The rest of the world needs us â€“ and we need the rest of the world. If the British church is to thrive in the future, it will be because God blesses us through an infusion of brothers and sisters from around the world. They may come as formal missionaries, or they may be students, business people and immigrants. It is quite probable that they wonâ€™t have all of their theological ts crossed and is dotted, but they will bring an experience and expectation of God working in their lives that we desperately need in the UK today. The big question is whether we are ready to welcome and learn from people who donâ€™t fit our stereotypes of what missionaries and Christian workers should be like. To my mind, this is still an open question.

Resources:

This paper on the future of mission agencies develops some of the themes above in a lot more detail.

I think this Global Connections guide on church to church partnerships gives some good practical advice on putting some of the things I touch on into practice.