CHARACTER, MISSION AND THE LOCAL CHURCH

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If our character is an important factor in how we go about mission, then we need to ensure that the right supporting structures are in place.
Category: Observations

Back in dark ages, when I first started blogging, there were lots of Christian bloggers who would bounce ideas around, posting ideas back and forward and linking to each others' posts. These days, some of that same interaction happens on Twitter, but the links aren't picked up in the same way, so readers of this blog don't have an easy way to follow what people are saying in response to what they read here. For example, picking up on yesterday's post, my friend Peter Rowan of OMF tweeted a couple of things, including this:

https://twitter.com/ptrrowan/status/1070090646847975424

I'd like to pick up on that last word in Peter's tweet; *character*.

On one level,Â *characterÂ* can simply relate to personality. Some of us have an outgoing character, others are phlegmatic, encouraging, generous or what-have-you. There is room for different personalities in mission, though introverts and extroverts may choose to work in very different ways. We need to learn to work together, to appreciate one another's differences and to get the best out of a diverse team which is never easy. However, a diverse group of people with different personalities is essential in mission work (diversity needs to reach beyond the issue of personality, but that's the subject of a different blog post).

However, there is a different aspect to character which is even more pertinent to mission; you might want to call it Christian maturity or sanctification or you may have another preferred term. Essentially, it is that bit of our character which is shaped by and reflects our relationship with God. It's not that people involved in mission all need to be quasi-perfect, super-saints. They don't (or I wouldn't be here). However, if you are going to be involved in mission you do need firstly to have a real, living faith and secondly, you need to be committed to growing and maturing in your faith.

If one of the keys of mission is making Jesus' disciples, then this can only be done if we are growing and maturing disciples ourselves.

There are a number of implications of this that I'd like to highlight, though I won't explore any of them in detail in this post.

- Mission literature and training focuses on methodology. How to do mission in different circumstances and situations. Mission agencies often spend a lot of time developing strategies and new approaches to allow them to use their people and resources more effectively. All of this is good and necessary (to a point), however, the success or failure of these methods and strategies will generally depend on the character of the people carrying them out, rather than on the quality of the methods and strategies themselves.
- The implication of this is that we need to invest significant time and resources in ensuring that mission staff are growing and maturing disciples. Time spent on annual personal reviews, spiritual retreats and one-to-one counselling and encouragement is not wasted. (I would, incidentally, make the same point regarding church staff at home.)

- Taking this a step further, it is important to ask which organisations are best equipped to help people to grow as Christians. I am not convinced that mission agencies are the best answer to the question. Agencies have a role in supporting and encouraging the wellbeing of their staff, but that is not their primary focus. I would argue that the best structure for helping people to grow and mature as disciples is actually the local church. Missionaries need to be linked to, accountable to and supported by a fellowship of believers who take responsibility for caring for them. This care must go beyond praying and sending money, it also involves a commitment to their growth and development as Christians (the church should think in these terms about all of its members). Ideally, missionaries should also be involved in a church on "the field", too - though that isn't always possible.

The relationship between sending church and mission agency is a complex one that needs constant attention and dialogue if it is to reach its full potential. However, if we truly believe that character is an important facet of mission, we will take the time to ensure that the right structures are in place.