DOES YOUR MISSION AGENCY HAVE A MISSION II

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Category: Observations

Yesterday, I suggested that mission agencies can have all of the appearances of success â€" effective fundraising, good media profile and increasing recruitment â€" while being irrelevant to the wider world. The future of mission lies in the growing churches of the Global South, not in the traditional mission sending countries of the West. We have a role to play in the future, but that must be worked out in dialogue with the growing world church; we can't act as though we call the shots. It will take a few posts to unpack what this dialogue should look like and I'd like to start with the easy bit.

A while ago, I heard a story about a missionary who wanted to illustrate his newsletter with some scenes of local life, so he went to where a group of children were playing and started to take a few photos. The problem was he was a missionary to the UK and, as might be expected, the sight of a foreigner taking photographs of kids in a park caused all sorts of uproar. We Brits understand that it is inappropriate to take photographs of random children in this country - but it is not unusual for British missionaries or agencies to do exactly the same that the unfortunate missionary to the UK did. Why is it wrong to take photographs of British children, but ok to splash pictures of African kids all over our prayer letters and missionary magazines?

When we talk about other cultures, especially when we are using their photographs and stories to promote our own organisations, it is essential that those we are depicting have a voice in the way that we describe them.

In order to attract funds and recruits, mission agencies have an interest in depicting other people as needy and unable to help themselves without outside help. However, things are always more complex than this, and most (all?) groups object to being described as having no agency in their own situations. When we present the groups we work with as helpless and we imply that we are the only ones that can change their situation, we are both distorting the truth and doing a disservice to the people that we are claiming to help. The problem is, that I have seen many fund-raising appeals and videos from mission agencies that make exactly these sorts of statements. There are some very, very crass fund-raising appeals from evangelical agencies out there (no, I'm not linking to them).

If we are to be relevant to the future of mission, we have to do our work in true partnership with Christians around the world and this starts with the way in which we talk about the communities we work with. This might mean that we can't craft our fund-raising appeals in the sort of ways that the experts tell us we should and it may even mean that we don't raise as much money as we'd like to - but that is not the most important thing in our work.