WHAT'S GOOD IN WORLD MISSION?

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The church is growing faster than it ever has done before and the world mission force is more diverse than at any time in history. We should be encouraged by these things - but we can't afford to be complacent.
Category: Musing On Mission Themes

People sometimes comment that my take on world mission is too negative; for example, I recently posted a whole series suggesting that there is a crisis in mission agencies. My view is that I am simply reflecting reality. However, taking on board the criticisms, I thought that I would highlight two important and very good things that are happening in World Mission today (though I can't quite resist a little balancing statement at the end).

Firstly, more people are becoming Christians than at any other time in history. Let that sink in for a moment. Whether you go back to the first days of the early church, the rapid spread of Christianity into Asia, the Reformation, the Wesleyan revival or the heyday of the modern mission movement in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the growth of the church today dwarfs all of those. While it may not appear to be the case in the UK and Western Europe, this is the most exciting time in history to be a Christian. It's very easy to get discouraged about the state of the church in our part of the world, but across the globe we are living in unparalleled times. Jesus is building his church and the gates of hell are crumbling before him. If you'd like to get a snapshot of where the church is across the world, the Centre for the Study of Global Christianity have produced some updated statistics that may be of interest.

The second point that I'd highlight is that through the expansion of the church, the world mission movement is far more diverse than it ever has been before. Traditional agencies such as my own, have an increasing number of international partners and affiliates. This means that someone who joins Wycliffe Bible Translators today is likely to work in a multinational team, perhaps with an Asian or African supervisor. This has its challenges, but it brings an amazing richness to the work experience - if you are considering working with an agency that is staffed and lead entirely by westerners, you might want to think twice about it! However, it's not just that traditional agencies are changing, there are a whole raft of new groups emerging in different parts of the world. Some of these groups are inspired by Western agencies and look very like the sort of things that we are familiar with, others look completely different. However, the most exciting thing is that most "mission" that is done in the world is not done by organisations or agencies, but by individuals witnessing to their friends and family and to people that they meet as they travel. Christians whose photo will never appear on the front of a mission magazine and who will never feature in a book on the spread of the church are quietly, sometimes at great personal cost, telling people about Jesus in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

However, while all of this is true and very encouraging, we need to realise that as fast as the church is growing, the population of the world is growing faster. Despite incredible numbers of conversions, the proportion of Christians in the world (about one third) is at best static and possibly decreasing. We should be encouraged, but we should not be complacent.