FOUR THINGS THE WESTERN MISSION MOVEMENT NEEDS TO PAY ATTENTION TO

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The title captures the gist.
Category: Mission Agency Futures

The modern Western mission movement has seen huge success over the past 200 or so years. But now, partly to the efforts of that movement, the world has changed dramatically and if Western missions are to remain relevant they will need to make some radical changes. I would like to suggest that there are three areas in particular that we need to pay attention to.

The World Church: I've said this numerous times, but the future of the church and of world mission lies outside of the West. Churches around the world are growing while much of the West is in recession. These growing churches are reading the Bible in their contexts, not ours, and are starting to take a much more active role in world mission. This means that there is a whole new workforce out there and they don't necessarily see things in the same way that we do in the West. Given that Western missions will need to partner with people from across the globe and that our mission efforts are often focussed on the areas that our brothers and sisters come from, we have to take their input serious in our plans and discussions about mission. Any planning or strategising for mission which is not carried out with Christians from our host countries or from the region of the world where we work is misplaced. We should not be doing it.

The Home Church: Mission agencies have typically had a rather limited ecclesiology - if they've had an ecclesiology at all. Churches are the source of missionaries, finance and prayers, but beyond that, we've not given them much role - the pray, pay and go-away model. Theologically, this was never a good approach, though there are pragmatic reasons why things happened the way they did. However, this is becoming increasingly unacceptable. Churches want a bigger say in what their members are doing and some are questioning whether mission agencies are required in the first place. There needs to be a much better dialogue between churches in the UK and mission agencies. Interestingly, when I write things like this, I inevitably get comments from agency leaders saying how wonderful their links with churches are and other comments from church leaders decrying the way that agencies don't talk to them - they can't both be right! For the record, I think that there are some major problems in the way that missionary support works in this country and these exacerbate the church-agency issues.

Our View of Mission: The overall pattern of mission, proclaiming the Good News and demonstrating it through works of service won't change. However, the way in which this is worked out needs to be rethought in partnership with Christians from around the world. Let's just take one example. The whole idea of unreached people groups is a Western one, which we tend to take to other countries and expect believers in other contexts to take up and run with. I've often heard Western missionaries complain that local Christians don't care about mission as they don't want to reach the UPGs in their country. What I hear much less frequently, is Western Christians seeking to understand what the priorities of those local Christians are. To take a strategy from our part of the world (however well founded or well intentioned) and imposing it on believers in other places, using it as a measure of their orthodoxy, is the height of arrogance. I thought we'd moved beyond that sort of thing. This isn't to say that UPGs are wrong, but our understanding of how they are defined and reached needs to

be worked out with believers in other parts of the world. Likewise our understanding of what constitutes appropriate works of service and how they are done needs to change.

Our Structures: We have inherited a 200 year old model of mission agencies, designed to take the gospel from the Christian West to the rest of the world. If the Western mission movement is to remain relevant in the mid to long-term, we will have to develop new structures which are more appropriate for the world we find ourselves in.

OK, I've not said anything new here, I realise that, but I wanted to draw some thoughts together in one post.