SOME THOUGHTS ON STUDYING FOR A PHD

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Some thoughts on my doctoral studies including one or two interesting (controversial?) conclusions and a few personal revelations.
Category: Observations

As regular readers of this blog will know, for the last four years, I've been studying for a PhD. Well, a couple of weeks ago I had myÂ *viva* and my thesis was accepted, though there are some minor corrections to before everything is signed sealed and delivered. However, assuming my corrections are accepted, then in a few months, I'll get to walk over the stage at Leeds Trinity University wearing a silly hat and I'll be able to call myself Dr Arthur (which I won't). Anyway, as this process comes towards its end, it seemed a good idea to share a few thoughts about the process.

The title of my thesis was "The Interaction between the Mission Theology and the Practices and Publicity of Six British Mission Agencies". Essentially, I took four current themes in mission theology (unreached people groups, the distinction between proclamation and social action, the mission of God and a missional hermeneutic) and looked at the way in which six agencies interacted (or didn't interact) with these concepts. I then looked at all of the publicity produced by the agencies (websites, magazines etc.) in order to get a picture of what it is that the agencies actually did. The aim was to see the extent to which the agencies' theological positions influenced their activities. The results were complex and it isn't appropriate to try and unpack them here (not least because it would be a very long blog post). However, there were a few little insights that might be of interest in passing; here are a couple.

- From the information I gathered, there is no apparent link between the social media reach of a mission agency and its size and income. Although there is a huge focus on social media, it could be that it is an inefficient way of promoting the work of mission agencies.
- International bodies such as the Lausanne Movement and the World Evangelical Alliance (and the documents they produce) are more or less irrelevant to the British mission movement. I know that this will be controversial in some quarters, but my conclusions on this one are pretty robust.
- Just because a famous name in mission studies asserts something is true doesn't mean that the people on the ground doing mission agree with them.

Some personal thoughts.

I like research: the whole process of digging deep into a subject is one that I thoroughly enjoy. Reading books and papers, interviewing people and then drawing common threads from the information is far more fun than you might expect. This isn't entirely a surprise, my first job was doing research in plant physiology and the bits I enjoyed about field Bible-translation was the working out how the language worked. I've done a lot of different things over the years and in a sense, I'm a polymath, but at heart, I'm a researcher.

Hard information is important: a lot has been written about the mission movement in the UK, but there is very little hard evidence to back up what has been said. If agencies are to make good decisions, they need good information to base them on. That information can only be obtained by taking a look at the evidence. An example: it is generally believed that new mission agencies focus

on sending short term missionaries rather than long term ones. However, by looking at the mission sector as a whole, I've demonstrated that newer agencies are unlikely to send any missionaries - short or long term.

Getting the information is not enough: in a sense, I'd love to live in an ivory tower, researching about mission and becoming increasingly knowledgable on a smaller and smaller field. However, the whole point of my research is to help agencies and their leadership to navigate the increasingly complex world that we live in. When you are busy doing stuff, you don't always have time to look around you at the changing situation and to think about the future. The pressing needs of the present can be overwhelming in mission leadership. My job is to provide information and forward thinking to help agencies get to grips with the bigger picture. Over time, I will be publishing my results and some of my thoughts will emerge on this blog and in other papers, but the greatest satisfaction comes from sitting down with mission agency boards and leadership teams and reflecting together on the bigger picture that is emerging from my research.

On a personal note: motives are always mixed; I wanted to study mission agencies and doing a PhD was one way to do that. However, I also saw it as unfinished business, I started a doctorate in 1981, but never completed it because I was in a hurry to join Wycliffe. However, the deep personal motivation goes back a decade before that and emerges in the dedication to my thesis:

> *This thesis is dedicated to the memory of James Leonard Arthur, who during his final illness predicted that his then twelve-year-old son would, one day, obtain a PhD. It's been a canny wait, but this is for you, Dad.*