IGNORING THE UNREACHED

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Category: Observations

There are lots of different views and convictions illustrated on my social media feeds. Some people are virulently anti-Brexit, while others think it is the best thing since sliced bread. I follow Calvinists, Pentecostals, Baptists and atheists - I get quite a spread of religious opinions. In this piece, I'd like to home in on one of the more obscure distinctions in my feed. I follow a lot of people involved in world mission, many of whom regularly talk about the needs of the unreached around the world and I follow a lot of other Christians - mainly British church leaders - who hardly ever (if ever) mention the needs of global unreached people groups.

I realise that a statement like this is likely to be construed as offensive, so let me quickly add a few comments. Firstly, this is a generalisation, there are exceptions to the rule. Secondly, a lot of British church leaders talk about the needs of the unreached people in their neighbourhoods. Thirdly, although I've not done a statistical analysis of my twitter feed, it's an observation that I stand by, so even if it is offensive, that is because I believe it is true.

In passing, I have noticed that US church leaders seem much more likely to be concerned about unreached peoples around the world than their British counterparts - perhaps there is a blog post in there for the future.

So, what might lie behind this apparent (to me, at least) lack of interest in unreached people groups in the UK? I suspect that there are two issues; ignorance and indifference; let's take them in turn.

Ignorance: in my experience, many British church leaders are simply unaware of the scale of the remaining task (horrible term). Of course, church leaders have a massive job and many calls on their time and it is impossible for them to be up to date with everything that is happening in their own locality, much less across the globe. However, I think that there are three factors which feed into this which make it harder for leaders to get hold of the big picture.

- In the UK we tend to be somewhat sceptical about some of the statistical side of mission work (I share that scepticism), this means that we are less well-positioned to benefit from the good work of people like the Joshua Project who document the needs of the worldwide unreached.
- Secondly, I believe that stories of the growth of the church around the world have caused us to take our eyes off the work that is still to be done. We are aware of amazing things happening and this drowns out the needs of those who are not reached.
- Thirdly, only a minority of relatively smaller mission agencies focus on unreached people groups. The press releases which appear in Christian magazines and newspapers and the brochures which are mailed out to ministers and churches tend to focus on other aspects of mission. If you want to know about the unreached, you have to go out of your way to find out about them and who has the time to do that?

Indifference: there are all sorts of factors that pile in here; Â post-colonial guilt, a reluctance to push our views on others, the desire to concentrate on the needs on our doorstep... These are complex

issues and each one could be unpacked in detail. However, in a short blog post like this one, I'd just suggest that what they add up to is that reaching groups around the world who don't know Jesus is not a priority for many of us (for a variety of reasons, of varying legitimacy).

I don't agree with those who see reaching the unreached as being the only valid form of Christian mission; it is much broader and richer than this. However, taking the Gospel to places where people do not know about Jesus is an indispensable part of mission - it is not something we can ignore. Equally, I don't believe that every church should send missionaries to the unreached; the size of most British churches mitigates against this - we can't all do everything. I'd take a step further and say that reaching the unreached doesn't always involve travel; working with immigrant communities or overseas students is a perfectly legitimate approach.

However, I would argue that every church should have some sort of regular focus on the unreached. This can be achieved through contact with a mission partner, as part of a regular prayer focus, children's talks or any one of a hundred different approaches.

I realise that it is easy for me as someone who works in the mission world to raise issues like this. I don't face the daily stresses and strains of a church leader and the last thing I would want to do is to add to the burdens of already busy people. So how can we spur one another on to share a concern for the billions who, as things stand, have no opportunity to hear about Jesus?