TRAINING FOR MISSION

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If we are to speak the Gospel into British culture we need to understand that culture. Like Paul in Acts 17, we need to observe what is going on around us and we need to speak into the issues that pre-occupy people. This isn't dumbing down the gospel, it is actually far harder work than repeating the same message that we've always used.Â

Category: Observations

When we trained to work as Bible translators we had to get to grips with a wide range of subjects from basic field medical care to how to recognise a chiasmus in the Greek text of the New Testament. We also spent a lot of time looking at how to work cross-culturally, much of which could be boiled down into one simple phrase: "when you come across something new, or different to what you are used to, don't simply condemn it, try and understand why it is done that way and how the gospel speaks into it".

We knew that when we crossed cultures we would encounter ways of thinking and acting that were very different to our own and we were well prepared for those encounters (not that this stopped us making mistakes). We knew that we had to listen, ask questions and seek to understand why things were the way they were before we could help people to see how the Bible's teachings applied to their context. The last thing we needed to do was to take our own "Christian" culture and plonk it into the West African rainforest.

It is interesting to see the way in which the British church has gone on a similar journey to the one we took, without getting on an aeroplane and without the benefit of pre-field training. British society has changed dramatically over the last fifty years (and is still changing), we know longer live in the same culture as the 1980s, much less the 1950s or earlier. On the surface, we see this reflected in hot-button issues such as sexuality and equality, but these are underpinned by deeper issues about where authority lies, who has the right to make decisions and our individual relationship to wider society. You rarely hear people talk about a post-modern suspicion of meta-narratives, but you will hear them say that you can't trust politicians, journalists, clergymen and so on, because they are all in it for themselves. Our society is being shaped by deep currents thought and attitudes.

The thing is, the church finds itself in this new world, without actually having moved. We've stayed where we are, while the world around us has changed - the reverse of my experience in mission. The problem is that this often means that we have a confused attitude to the changes around us. Let me illustrate this with a story that I heard a well-known preacher tell on more than one occassion. He was speaking to a group of students and seeking to demonstrate the objective truth of the Christian message, but was aghast when the students told him they didn't care if it was true or not, they wanted to know if it was relevant to them. The preacher used this as an illustration to show that modern (post-modern?) attitudes were wrong because they didn't accept objective truth. The thing is, the preacher was doing exactly what stereotypical missionaries are accused of doing - dealing with people from a different culture according to his cultural rules. Basically, he was saying, that when the students learned to ask the right questions, he had the answers for them. What he should have done was listen to their concerns about relevance and show how Christ answers those concerns.

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pre-occupy people. This isn't dumbing down the gospel, it is actually far harder work than repeating the same message that we've always used.

I'm a bloke in my sixties, I'm far from an expert in British popular culture (though I know a lot about 1970s rock). However, I can make a few observations; we are obsessed by stories. Whether it is TV box sets, soap operas or seeing someone go on a "journey" in Strictly Come Dancing, our society is fascinated by story telling and the relationships between people in those stories. Equally, we don't like rules and external authority - "you are not the boss of me". Just thinking about these two factors, how could they shape our evangelism? I'd suggest that we probably shouldn't start by telling people they are sinners and that they need to change, it will just get their backs up and they won't listen anymore. Yes, they need to be brought to that point, but it is a process. However, we do have an amazing story to tell, from a book which gives an incredible narrative that runs through the whole of history - much more comprehensive than any box set. Perhaps we need to start with telling God's stories, the way in which he relates to frail human beings and meets their needs for relationships both in himself and in the people of God.

As I say, I'm not an expert on British popular culture, so my suggestions may miss the point. However, I am convinced that we need a missionary mindset in the UK. Most churches now find themselves in a cross-cultural situation and both the leaders and the members in the pew need to take this on board if we are to impact the UK for Christ.

The last thing we need to do is take our own "Christian" culture and plonk it in the towns and cities of the UK.