

HOW CAN THE UK CHURCH ENGAGE IN MISSION TODAY'S WORLD?

I have been asked to set the context for our consultation together as we seek to come up with principles of "how UK churches should engage in world mission".

Over the years at conference like this, we have reflected on important global changes that effect world mission and the UK church.

- The large church in the Global South and demise of the Western church especially in Europe. Do we really get it?
- Migration and people movements –the world is now fluid. Have we adapted?
- Urban shift, especially in Asia. Are our mission priorities and strategies still based around rural populations and fixed rurally based people groups – when actually people groups are now more scattered than ever before?
- The poverty gap still increasing in many contexts. Are we blind to the effects?
- Multi-nationals rule – Do we ape the model in our denominations and agencies?
- Communications – or is it a new form of control?

This conference is going to be different in that our hope is to agree together some principles that can be used as a basis for our engagement in God's world.

So a few thoughts rather early on which I hope might be provocative in getting discussions going over the next 48 hours. I have been very impressed over the years how churches and mission agencies have tried together to listen to God's voice.

As I have met hundreds of mission and church leaders over the past ten years, a few things have really struck me that we need to take seriously.

1. HARD PLACES

Yes the church in the Global South has grown incredibly, but such growth is not consistent. Yes Asia now has large numbers of Christians compared to 100 years ago but with such a huge proportion of the world's population, as the percentage of Christians of the total population is small at just 8%. It just doesn't compare to sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America.

There are still vast numbers of people who have never heard of Christ and many countries still where Christians are few and far between. Indeed some countries have seen Christian fleeing elsewhere due to war and conflict and persecution such as Iraq and Syria.

Despite this according to the Atlas of Global Christianity, 85% of all Christian mission is aimed at other "Christians". Much mission deployment is still trying to sustain the growth of the churches in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Other research reveals that as many as 86% of all Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists do not personally know a Christian.

I personally have a huge problem with how some people deal with the issue of unreached people groups and the focus on ethnicity as if that is the only problem. Yes this is important but middle class Buddhists in Japan have few Christians among them, middle class Hindus and Sikhs seem almost impossible to reach. We need something more nuanced now people are mixed up in an urbanised world. I live in leafy Leamington Spa and we have one of the largest Sikh temples in Europe. Yet I personally have little contact with them. How can I even stand up and talk about this issue when I am and all the churches in my town make so little acknowledgement of the privilege we have?

So to my mind, much too much of what we call mission focuses on "Christians". There are more people alive today that do not know of Christ or experienced Christian care or even met a Christian than ever before. We cannot ignore this and something needs to change.

IS ENSURING WE SERVE THE HARD PLACES A KEY PART OF OUR CHURCH'S STRATEGY?

2. SOFT DISCIPLESHIP

Another challenge for us here in the UK is the belief and practice of the growing churches of the Global South. Many Global South Christians are more conservative in terms of both beliefs and moral teaching than many of the mainstream churches of the West. Many preach deep personal faith and communal orthodoxy, mysticism, and puritanism, appealing to scriptural authority. Just look at the gay issue in the Anglican Communion.

Many have said that the church in the global south is “one mile wide and an inch deep”. However that is not my experience. Prayer is often more everyday than in the western church. Dependency on God, rather than wealth. generosity and hospitality, rather than selfish individualism – the list is endless.

In my previous position, I often spent times in places like the Philippines. One of my best friends is Nathan Mejica. He looks on me as a mentor, but for me his faithfulness, prayer life, dependence on God is just something that I aspire to have just a little more of. At one time some of his family turned on him and tried to oust him. His quiet acceptance of what happened, warmth to those who wronged him and prayer for the best to come out of the situation, have remained with me since. I am sure that we all know people like that – he has been my mentor and inspiration.

Yes some preach messages that, to many westerners, appear simplistic, hyper-charismatic and apocalyptic. However we all know that life is not split into departments like it is for us westerners. Healing, exorcism and dream or visions are all fundamental parts of religious sensibility. Of course there are excesses that many struggle with such as the prosperity gospel, but actually wouldn't it be great to capture some more of their excitement of knowing Christ.

For me, there is a huge contrast with the marked spiritual poverty of many churches in the West. Some have said to me that they find the western Church “one inch wide and not even an inch deep”. Too harsh? Maybe but maybe we need to reflect more on that.

I came back from the Cape Town Lausanne Congress with an enormous sense that the UK church would benefit from more commitment to prayer and a discovery of a deep spirituality. Talking to a friend from Kenya last week, he is just about to move to a new black majority church in Ashford, mainly Central African. He wondered if even he could cope with the expectations for prayer and fasting that are a normal part of church life of that congregation.

HOW WILL THE WESTERN CHURCH, TRAPPED IN ITS SECULARISM AND MODERNITY AND SUBSERVIENCE TO TOLERATION, RESPOND TO THIS SHIFT? DO WE WANT TO LISTEN AND LEARN?

3. THE WEST RULES OK!

At this conference two years ago, Peter Oyugi said this: “We could cite examples of situations where due to years of some Western missionaries being patronising and domineering in the mission fields, contributions of those from the global South have been practically ignored.” I have spoken to many of those who have come to the UK who experience the same thing.”

After a consultation at St Saviours Guildford last week on how can we listen to the Global church, Phil Simpson said: “For me the issue is that we need to tackle our inherent national pride (‘God is an Englishman’). We need to shift so we allow more of a lead from the Global South – especially the diaspora in our midst – including their voice in what we plan and do.”

I think many Westerners involved in cross-cultural mission have realised the need for more respect, mutuality and equality. So this is not a rant about our colonial past. However are we prepared to change to a position of respect and a partnership between equals?

Two years ago Peter Oyugi went on to say: “We can only make progress in the global church through honest dialogue and careful discernment. We must remain committed to the teachings of Scripture that affirm that those who are in Christ Jesus, have “received the Spirit of sonship” (Rom 8:15b) and are “members together of

one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus. (Eph 3:6). There is need for the West to understand the need for change to be Christ-like rather than western-like.”

So while the numbers are now in the Global South, money and its associated power are still solidly in the West. Partnerships in which money is involved often end up in problems of dependency, destroying that mutually. It nearly destroyed my relationship with friends in Thailand and was unhealthy for us both. Their desire to honour me by always bowing to my suggestion because of my finances. My sense of being needed by them as if they couldn't do without me. I remember at a Tearfund conference in 1997 hearing someone from Ghana reflect back: “Partnership, oh that is the new name form imperialism!” That was his experience.

The power of the West is especially relevant in terms of language. At the Cape Town conference, all plenary speakers were only allowed to speak in English. Yes there were pragmatic reasons but for many of the people that I spoke to it was just another example of the West calls the shots.

In physics, there is something called the observer effect, which notes that measurements of certain systems cannot be made without affecting those systems. In one sense there is the same when one culture seeks to interact with another. Can we really listen neutrally when we come from a position of cultural superiority, or power, or inequality in learning and wealth? Even if we come as listeners and learners, do we realise the effect our presence and culture has on others, and this cannot be changed overnight?

Have we really progressed from much from the Edinburgh conference of 1910. VS Azariah from South India concluded: “Through all the ages to come the Indian church will rise up in gratitude to attest the heroism and self-denying labours of the missionary body. You have given your goods to feed the poor. You have given your bodies to be burned. We also ask for love. Give us FRIENDS!

I believe the West has so much to offer into world mission. Our day is not over, but we are now part of the global church and we need to reflect that in our relationships with other parts of God's church.

WILL THE WEST UNDERSTAND THE NEED FOR CHANGE TO BE CHRIST-LIKE RATHER THAN WESTERN-LIKE?

4. FROM THE REST TO EVERYWHERE

For many years we have celebrated the rise in the mission movement from the Global South as the church has grown. Korea has sent out more than 20,000 missionaries to over 160 countries. The Back to Jerusalem movement is just one illustration from China. India, Nigeria and Brazil are large sending nations now as are many countries in South America.

One response has been to try to assimilate them into the western or western founded multi-national mission agencies. Maybe many of us in mission agencies now rely on the global South for our workers?

Encouragingly though many of these missionaries have vastly different realities than us from the West

- English is usually not their mother tongue
- They tend to come from economically less affluent countries and so understand the issues of poverty and suffering. So there is less of a power issue
- They don't bring with them a political backdrop of global dominance
- They often enter into ministry with a willingness to live by faith and to suffer for the gospel rather than having guaranteed salaries accompanied with world class health and evacuation insurance

Yet people such as Patrick Fung from OMF are concerned these movements may be repeating the same mistake of their Western brethren such as equating economic and political power with advances in the spreading of the gospel and that the gospel is always from the powerful to the powerless, the haves to the have-nots. Will the Global South church repeat our mistakes?

The western world professionalised mission and only really recognises full-time faith based “missionaries”. Yet in the early church it seems to me to have been this spontaneous migration that fuelled the spread of the Christian faith and we have similar opportunity today.

Bob Lopez of the Philippines Mission Association estimates that there are 1.3 million Filipinos in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the UAE. Probably this means there are 100,000 evangelicals among them – with 300 Filipino churches in Saudi Arabia alone. What a missional opportunity. The Philippines Mission Association now has a major focus on capacity building this group of people. They see it as a new opportunity for mission.

CAN THE WEST WORK ALONGSIDE SUCH NEW MODELS, LEARNING TOGETHER A WAY FORWARD?

5. DIVIDE AND RULE

I am constantly disturbed by the increasing number of small charities in the UK, many in funding relationships with local Global South churches and NGOs. There are just many agencies guys. GC relies on numbers so please don't change!!

Christians around the world are now found in some 41,000 denominations. These range in size from millions of members to fewer than 100. The vast majority of denominations are found in the Independent and Protestant traditions.

Moonjang Lee observes, "Christianity has become too fragmented. Existing in a fragmented world, churches fail to show a united front." We have exported our western divisions and individualism.

Here in the UK I get increasingly depressed by the fragmentation in the evangelical church. A recent paper talked about 14 tribes in among UK evangelicals. Pete Broadbent has written an excellent article about 8 tribes – so we can't even agree on how many tribes there are. Division has even become "I won't associate with him as he is talks to him." We have made disunity an art-form. I wonder what is God's heart towards his church

The Church is the centre of God's plan to reach out. Local church is central to us, but maybe not our own individual churches. I was delighted to see at a sign at Greyfriars in Reading, part of God's church in Reading.

HOW CAN WE WITNESS TO A WORLD BADLY IN NEED OF CHRIST IN A MORE UNIFIED WAY?

CLOSING THOUGHTS

So what place does the UK church and mission movement have as part of the new worldwide church?

- Do we realise the gap in our ministry with those who have never heard the name of Jesus?
- Will we rediscover our "first love" or remain lukewarm?
- Can we replace the 'us and them' perspective (West to the rest) by a worldwide 'we'.
- Can the church engage in the mission of God in new ways?
- Can we seek unity in diversity that flourishes where we understand and trust one another in our differences as well as in our agreements, listen humbly to one another, seek forgiveness where we have injured our brothers and sisters in Christ, and rejoice in the multi-coloured grace of God. To quote Andrew Walls **Together we can be a new community – a hundred places learning from each other, with no one single centre of Christianity or single type of mission activity.**

To finish with another quote from Peter Oyugi:-

"I believe that God's mission demands a stepping out in faith and every step of faith is not devoid of risks. Those who fear that the church in the global South is too naïve or shallow to engage in world mission, or that they can't cope with the rigours of the rational thinking of Western society must have deliberately forgotten that, salvation in Christ Jesus is by grace through faith (Eph 2:8). It is time for Christ's church to arise as one people, serving one God who is creator and Lord of the universe, to proclaim the good news of Jesus to those who are "without hope and without God in the world" (Eph 2:12c)

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