

Changing Global Mission Culture in the UK Church

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Introduction

About two years ago, I started talking about the need to change church culture with regard to world mission. Since then, several other people have also used the phrase, sometimes in response to my statements and my work with Global Connections. In this paper I want to explain what I mean, why I think it is necessary to try and change church culture and also to suggest some ways of going about it.

Two important points are necessary by way of introduction:

Firstly, trying to change a culture is never quick or easy. It takes time, heartache, and often creates some resentment and misunderstanding. One of the reasons why we have seen the formation of so many new churches in recent years is that Christians have given up trying to change the culture of the existing churches and have found it easier to leave that baggage behind and start again. Whether they were right to do so is another question, but the difficulty of introducing and negotiating change has driven them to abandon the struggle.

If we are going to work for a change of culture with regard to world mission in thousands of evangelical churches in the UK, we are going to have to be radical.

Secondly, the variety of churches in the UK is considerable and increasing all the time. Some of these local congregations have been founded or developed with a mission ethos that encompasses the globe. So, not all churches need a radical culture change when it comes to world mission. However, there are thousands of churches in the UK whose involvement in God's world is limited to a few moments in a service or a few poorly supported events. Even if we limit our concern to evangelical churches - those that agree that the gospel needs to be spread around the world and realise that Jesus did command us to go - thousands are stuck in a church culture that does not make it easy for them to move forward.

The present situation in many churches

- 1 World mission is a marginalised interest and commitment for a few. Many of the others in the church are glad that their church has a world mission programme, but don't want to have much to do with it themselves. 'Missionary' events are very poorly supported.
- 2 The world mission mandate is connected to the Great Commission, "We do it as a church because Jesus told us to."
- 3 World mission involvement is limited to what comes from 'missionary' people or societies and is disconnected from what comes via the TV screen, from world news or news documentaries.
- 4 World sport, world music, fair trade concerns, environmental calamities, political issues, international business travel and tourist travel are not promoted in church as issues that interest God or impact our faith.
- 5 Young people take little interest in the church's world mission culture.
- 6 On a weekly basis, world mission is represented by a world map with a few pins stuck in it and a small pile of 'missionary' magazines, untouched and rather out of date.

- 7 Even when young people have been on short-term programmes, the result has sometimes energised and interested other young people, but it often has done little to change the culture of the church with regard to world mission.

This is, of course, a stereotype, but whether all this is true or not, it represents a culture related to world mission, which is very real and rather fixed in thousands of churches in the UK.

How have churches tried to invigorate world mission?

This lack of commitment to world mission has not gone unnoticed, particularly by mission agencies. There have been new projects launched regularly over the years. Books have been published, programmes have been introduced, videos have been circulated and conferences have been organised. Recently, there have been several new initiatives to invigorate churches. Most of these efforts have been initiated by mission agencies, which are increasingly finding it difficult to raise the income they need to continue and expand their work.

The manner in which these publications and programmes promote world mission may vary, but the general pattern usually follows something like this –

- 1 Find a person enthusiastic for world mission.
- 2 Recruit a committee (action group etc) of committed people to work with them.
- 3 Get the church leader involved.
- 4 Identify 'missionaries' and mission activities already supported by members of the church.
- 5 Write a world mission policy statement for the church.
- 6 Organise events to promote world mission.

So why do we need to change the culture?

The most basic reason is because the programmes we have been using for years have not worked for most churches. World mission interest is still limited to a few.

So, if they have not worked, why have we been pursuing these programmes? The first answer is probably because these approaches have become a matter of habit and because of the inability to think in fresh ways. Secondly, to some it has appeared pointless to change what we do because the basic problem is entirely spiritual. 'The Devil delights in keeping us focussed on our own needs, and ourselves' we are told. When the Holy Spirit comes in power and we see revival, it will all be OK. There is some truth in both these reasons for no action.

But there is a third reason. While we have not been able to change the situation in many churches, we have over the years encouraged many individuals into world mission. There is a difference between giving local congregations a facelift with regard to global mission and getting more individual Christians to pray, give and go. The two issues are related but different and I think the distinction is important.

When we look at how British Christians have made an impact on world mission in the last 20-30 years, a great deal has been achieved. The number of Protestant Christians from the UK in mission overseas has been fairly static at around 6,000 although the trend shows a slight increase and a larger increase if you include various categories of short-termers. Many have given of themselves and of their wealth, sacrificially. We have seen major advances of the kingdom of God and Christians from the UK can take some pleasure and satisfaction from that.

But I suggest that many local congregations have not been of great assistance to world mission. Such advances have not taken place because of, or at the instigation of, the local congregation. The support for world mission has come from individual Christians from within the churches, rather than from the churches themselves.

You only have to look at the flow of people to see the point. When we think about getting people to go, the picture we get from Acts 13, and so often mention, is of the Antioch church taking the initiative and sending out Barnabas and Saul. (Whether Barnabas and Saul wanted to go at that stage is not mentioned – maybe they had to be persuaded by the church in Antioch.) But the church, at the prompting of the Holy Spirit, took the initiative.

But when did that last happen? What generally happens is that individuals feel “called”. They will explore the possibility, sometimes approach an agency themselves and then usually have to persuade a somewhat reluctant church to release them from their local responsibilities and find some money to support them.

The call, the commitment, the initiative and the urgency come from the individual Christians. They usually make the running and the local church, so often, has to catch up.

Many churches today are increasingly under pressure and the amount of volunteer help is reducing because more people are working full-time. Churches are reluctant to see good people leave.

Mission Agencies and church culture

Agencies know that most of the resources of people, prayer and finance that they need come from committed individuals rather than from the church as a whole. Because of the increasingly goal-orientated agency culture, they have understandably responded appropriately. The result is that agency representatives visit churches, not usually with any great optimism of getting money from the church itself, but because the church is the place where they can meet and build links with individual Christians who might well pray regularly, give generously and even go.

Mobilisation is a term that has been popular recently and we have several very gifted world mission mobilisers based in the UK. But they are generally targeting individuals. They go to churches because that is where the individuals are.

So the problem in UK churches has been exacerbated by the strategy of the agencies. We have got ourselves into a downward spiral. Agencies have understandably targeted individuals in the churches rather than churches themselves because that is where the resources they need are more likely to come from. Churches have been reluctant to get involved with agencies because the agencies only seem to want to take time and money from their people.

Looking ahead

If we continue to proceed with the present programmes, we will attract some more individuals into world mission. We may also improve the situation in some churches, but we are unlikely to see any dramatic change.

If we determine to try and change the world mission culture in our churches, we will have to be radical. We will have to stop doing some things that seem right and good. We will have to encourage a new way of thinking about, and relating to the world. We will have to abandon some of our accepted practices. We will have to change some of the terminology we use. We may well upset some people. We may seem for a while to be going backwards, but if we persist we could, in time, create a new way of relating to the world in our churches

which would release resources of people and money from the UK that we have never seen before.

So what do we need to do?

Here are some suggestions. You don't change culture by adding a few bits on. A total rethink is required. It may be possible to modify some things or even do some of the same things but get people to think differently about them. However, this approach is very difficult – it is easier to stop something and then relaunch something else with a new name and philosophy.

1 Relate to the world biblically (not just Great Commissionally)

Our church culture on world mission is linked to the Great Commission. Not the Great Commission as a culmination of the whole revelation of the great rescue plan for human beings, based on the character of God, but based on the last command of Jesus. Many people when asked why their church is interested in the world immediately mention the Great Commission.

So much of the churches' thinking about the world is limited to the saving of the lost in a very narrow sense. The statistics and programmes coming out of the US about the unreached do not help. Rather than give helpful statistics to those who have a biblical view of the world, they too often focus just on saving the lost. There are reasons in the history of evangelicalism to explain this.

To break the unhelpful church culture, we need to take a step back, stop talking about world mission and help people relate biblically to the world. This is God's world and he made it, cares for it and we are to care for it too as God's stewards. Even Jesus Christ, the saviour of the world, used words in Isaiah to explain his ministry in terms of preaching good news to the poor, binding up the broken-hearted, proclaiming freedom for the captives, releasing the prisoners and proclaiming the year of the Lord's favour.

Guilt Complex

If our commitment to world mission starts with the Great Commission not only are we biblically unbalanced but we also often develop a guilt complex in our churches that is unhelpful. The argument goes like this. Jesus said "Go!" You haven't gone. Don't you feel bad about it? What are you going to do about it? Come to the next world mission event and we will make you feel guilty again. Now, I am not saying that as Christians we are not guilty, nor do I deny the fact that many individual Christians are in world mission today because they were made to feel guilty, but it is one of the things that has unhelpfully shaped church culture and the churches' understanding of missiology in the last few decades.

To change church culture, we may have to take a step backwards. We may need to stop talking about world mission and start talk about the world.

2 Break down the home/field barrier

We still make a separation based on the English Channel – home and overseas. It affects our church structures, our budgets and our commitments. It takes us back to a colonial era and it reinforces the myth that missionaries are needed there where they need the gospel and not here because we have it.

Globalisation is an exciting phenomenon for the church. The church was the first truly global institution – consider the spread of people who joined on the first day of the church. (Acts

2:9-10) Globalisation affects us all. We all live with the effects of it, in the contents of our shopping trolleys and on the labels of the clothes we wear. Our local communities are filling with international students, asylum seekers, migrants, people from other EU countries, business travellers and world tourists.

The church needs to recapture its global characteristics. Mission starts at the end of the pew and extends to the ends of the earth. In most churches that will not be easy.

2.1 Understand Acts 1:8 properly

Firstly, we must start with a proper understanding of Acts 1:8. It does not describe a progressive involvement for the bigger churches with more resources. It is not a verse to show the different missionfields or the different callings for different churches. It shows that the world is one and all its people wherever they are need the same gospel, when we are empowered by the Holy Spirit.

2.2 Remove home/field terminology

Secondly, we must remove the home/field distinction and all the terminology that goes with it. We are so enveloped by our culture that we use terms like “home ministry”, “missionfield”, “overseas service” and “us/them”. Hopefully we have already got rid of terms like the heathen, but I wonder sometimes. Terms that separate us from the rest of the world need to be vetoed by the leadership and everyone should be kept accountable in this regard.

We need to see ourselves as part of the world and the church as part of a world-wide family. It won't happen if we just think it is a good idea. The culture is too ingrained for that.

2.3 Avoid the word ‘Missionary’

Thirdly, I think that one of those words we have to get rid of is ‘missionary’. These days I hardly ever hear the word used, apart from when there is some unhelpful association linked to it. Some people have tried to keep the word and say we are all missionaries, but the word has too much baggage with it for that to have made any difference.

2.4 Declare war on marginalisation

Fourthly, we need to declare war on anything that marginalises world mission. Many evangelical congregations ignore the world, but they don't ignore world evangelisation. They know they can't, because Jesus said we should spread the gospel round the world. They are happy to have an annual report from the world mission group. They know they have a missionary somewhere in Africa, but if you want to know more - ask so and so. Their only identification with the world, as church, is restricted to a culture that is related to all things ‘missionary’.

We need to be ruthless and this will often require drastic action. To change church culture we need to sometimes sacrifice the good things involving a few people, for better things that will change the culture and involve far more.

The traditional church missionary prayer meeting needs to go, if it hasn't gone already. The mission action group run by a few enthusiasts is usually avoided like the plague. Mission weekends may be unhelpful too.

Many of the accepted procedures for encouraging world mission have contributed to marginalising it. Global Connections has promoted a handbook entitled, ‘Think Global, Act Local’. ‘Be a World Mission Coordinator’ it says. ‘Form a World Mission Action Group’ it

recommends. Those are some of the most marginalising things you can do and they reinforce the accepted world mission culture. It gives a few people, whose motives are great, the chance to become unhelpful enthusiasts who cause everyone else to run a mile. I meet these groups regularly and ask myself the questions “Why don’t they get anywhere?” “Why don’t the leadership actively back them more?” And the answer is obvious.

3 Restructure the local church

We have already mentioned the first restructuring that needs to take place – close down anything that marginalises world mission and gives it a specialist-only label. ‘Think Global, Act Local’ suggests, ‘Write a Local Church Policy on World Mission’. I have been asked to help write a local church policy statement on world mission. I refused. Don’t write a policy statement on world mission for your local church, write a local Church Mission statement that involves the world.

But what about the Missionary Committee, the Mission Action Group or whatever it is called? These groups usually have two tasks. Firstly, they are responsible for providing the link with and generally look after church workers who are serving elsewhere. Secondly, they are responsible for promoting world mission in the church. The group should, I suggest, be closed down and its responsibilities divided.

3.1 ‘Human Resources’ Group

The ‘caring for’ and ‘looking after’ those around the world should be handled by a Human Resources Group, that has responsibility for all the people on whom church money is spent – the pastor, administrator, youth leader, cleaner, organist and all other workers of the church wherever they are located. There will be different arrangements, contracts and needs for each person, but the church has legal and other responsibilities for them all. This is a very practical way of removing the home/field barrier.

3.2 World Issues Group

Another group should be established, not to promote the old culture of world mission, but to promote the world. I suggest that it could be a world issues group. Christians know more about the world than ever before. World issues are presented to us every day. Children do projects on world issues at school. Many teenagers go through a vegetarian stage because of world issues. Fair Trade products are increasingly in the news.

World issues are where people are at and especially young people. We need to start by actively promoting those concerns in our church. We then need to establish the quite revolutionary idea that God is concerned too. Then, that there are Christians being directly affected by these issues and that there are ways we can help them. Don’t ignore peoples’ spiritual well-being, but don’t start there.

3.3 A global perspective on every agenda

We need to get the world onto every agenda in the church (just like prayer should be on every agenda of the church and not just restricted to the prayer meeting). But in many congregations that will not happen until you first demolish some of the ideas and structures that support the old culture. We need to introduce the world to every agenda in the church, not so that it just fits into the old ways of thinking, but so that every aspect of the world, physical and spiritual, is seen as God’s concern.

4 Maximise globalisation

How do Christians get information about the world? The situation has changed. 20 years ago it came from missionary prayer letters and agency magazines. Today information comes more regularly and more immediately through the TV screen from news broadcasts and news documentaries. But Christians hold that information in two hermetically-sealed compartments. News that comes from the screen we talk about at work and what comes from the magazines and prayer letters we pray about in church.

Increasingly for the new generation, information comes from the Internet. As Christians and churches, we need to relate to world information from the Internet and the media.

Church leaders each week could identify the world issue of the week, ring a young person with internet access and ask them to search for information that can form the basis of prayer and comment at a Sunday service. Agency publications and websites can be used as well, but if we are to change the culture we should not start there.

World music, world sport, human rights issues, local asylum seekers, the mosque down the road and our shopping baskets all connect Christians to the world. Our churches need to relate to God's world in as many ways as possible. Business and tourist travellers provide a great opportunity. Most Christian tourists take little notice of the culture in which they sun themselves! This holiday destination is not related to their faith. In many churches, the only things that relate personal faith to the world have a 'missionary' label. That is the culture that we must change.

In conclusion

I am very positive about the future of the UK church with regard to global mission. There are lots of encouragements ahead and we could see many churches catch a new vision for and involvement in the world.

But, I do believe that while the way we have encouraged world mission in churches during the last 20 years may have been effective in getting some individuals into world mission, it has also helped create a church culture with marginalises world mission and puts it into a 'give a wide berth' category for most members of the church. A major change I believe is now needed. We have to change that culture. We won't do that if we just keep doing and encouraging the same things – even if we do them better.

As I said at the beginning, your church may be different. But, a very radical approach is needed if we are going to get the majority of UK churches related and committed to the world again – and eventually committed to what we have called world mission.

This is one of the challenges before Global Connections and the whole global mission community. We need help in thinking through the issues. How can we best do that? How can we help congregations stuck in the 'missionary' culture, to see they need help? This is not the whole answer and it certainly is not a quick answer, but it is maybe a start. We are looking for ideas, suggestions, feedback and help from the churches and mission agencies. Do contact us in any way that is convenient to you.

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