

# Wake Up to the World –

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## ***A Rethink is Essential***

William Carey kick-started the modern evangelical missionary movement and since then local churches have been called to pray, give and go. A great deal has been accomplished. However, many local evangelical churches in the UK have failed to really become an internationally orientated community.

### **So what are the problems?**

- **Marginalisation** Pick any member of the congregation at random and ask them about the international commitment of the church. Unless you happen to have picked one of the few enthusiasts you are likely to get a blank look, an uncertain mention of an unpronounceable name or excuses.
- **Few younger people** Few below 50 attend the 'missionary' events, receive the 'missionary' literature or follow the fortunes of the church's missionaries. World mission is a huge turn off for many.
- **Horrendous prayer meetings!** The missionary prayer meeting is the number one church event to be avoided.

### **Some reasons for the problem**

- **Lack of spirituality** Undoubtedly the case, but an easy cop out.
- **The Guilt Complex** The reasoning goes like this. One, Jesus gave us the Great Commission. Two, you haven't obeyed it. Three, you are not spiritual. Four, don't you feel guilty about it? Five, what are you going to do about it?
- **Bad presentations** We are still suffering from a legacy of decades of bad, boring, irrelevant and inconsequential talks, anecdotes and picture shows.

In this column, I want to look at some ways to bring radical change to the way we promote international concern in many of our churches. Trying harder to do the same things will not work however good they were. We need to start again with a clean sheet. We need to modify our whole approach to 'missionary work'. Is there a way forward?

I have seven suggestions for turning things around. It might make a difference in your church, but beware the treatment may involve major surgery!

## ***Avoid that word 'missionary'***

We still use the word 'missionary' because we can't find another one. But the word is a millstone round the churches' neck and stops us moving ahead and removing the world mission culture that is throttling a relevant interest in God's world.

'Missionary' says unhelpful things about Christians who follow God's call to go and it also maintains an unhelpful view of our world.

The 'missionary' stereotype is of a super-saint who is old-fashioned, out of touch, extremely zealous, faithful but probably ineffective and certainly not cool. Christians who go overseas hate the stereotype but the word 'missionary' is always going to be associated with that unhelpful picture.

Worse still is the picture that the term 'missionary' gives us of the world we live in.

- It suggests that missionaries are needed there but not here. The truth is that UK expertise and finance is still needed, but with a declining church and a morally bankrupt society, we need the gospel as much as anywhere.
- It represents a sort of mission that only involves preaching. Thousands of Christians sent from here are used as radio engineers, graphic artists, computer programmers, lecturers and business people.
- It confirms our status as a 'missionary sending' nation. An rapidly increasing number of Christians from around the world are now working in the UK alongside churches. They bring to us enthusiasm, skills, expectation and spiritual gifts which we are desperately short of here.
- It exalts the missionary 'call'. A call is important for every Christian, but whether that is to an office round the corner or to the other side of the world is unimportant. No call is more important than any other; the important thing is to respond to God's call on your life.

No, I haven't got an alternative to the word 'missionary', but I am not convinced we need one.

### ***Beware the Enthusiast***

Enthusiasm is important but the enthusiast is often a major problem.

The enthusiast who has become an eccentric turns us all off. There they go on their hobbyhorse again, can't they talk about anything else, it gets so boring after a while and we certainly don't want to get involved. Yet in so many churches, it is these enthusiasts who, with the best of motives, spearhead the world mission concern and the rest of us run a mile. Unfortunately, we are not just talking about a few misfits but a large number of people scattered round the churches that are turning Christians off any meaningful concern or interest in God's world. Sadly, we find that some retired 'missionaries' fall into this category and reinforce the stereotype that we talked about last time and is so unhelpful.

But we also know enthusiasts who attract respect and whose enthusiasm is catching. So what makes an enthusiast a problem?

The enthusiast we need to retire is the one who gets their information from a limited 'Christian' source and has a very narrow field of interest. The person who gets so involved with the detail that they can't see the big picture. Because these people tend to think everybody should be passionate about the same things as themselves, they are often insensitive to the feelings of others and bore people with their never-ending tirade. Many of these people are great prayer warriors, but don't let them lead, control or shape your church's interaction with the world.

The enthusiastic person who is a good influence will be looking forward and not backwards. They will be recognising new initiatives and be encouraged by them. Their information will come from a wide range of sources. They will think positively about new trends and look for ways of learning from younger and more inexperienced people.

An uninformed person, who is eager to learn, is more useful than an enthusiast who puts people off.

### ***Remove the home/field barrier***

The modern 'missionary' movement started from these shores. We were the 'Christian' nation; they were the 'heathen'. We were 'home' and they were the 'missionfield'. We had it and they needed it. We were the senders and they were the receivers. Even if that might have been true once, it certainly is not true now. We need to remove the home/field barrier in our thinking and in every aspect of our mission.

**Mission starts at the end of the pew and extends to the ends of the earth.**

We live in a spiritually hungry culture. There are people who enter our places of worship that need to hear a clear presentation of the gospel – there are people with similar needs all around the world.

The English Channel is no barrier today. Globalisation is removing the barriers that as Christians we should have removed years ago. Our neighbour is anyone about whom we can form an opinion. Today we form opinions through easy travel and the media about people all over the world – they have become our neighbours.

Our cities are cosmopolitan, our universities have international students, business personnel travel the world, we holiday in distant destinations, 'missionaries' come here from Africa and South America, world music is all the rage and much of what we buy is produced in other countries. The barriers are down.

Yet in our churches, we maintain a home/field division that affects our attitudes, interests, mission structures and budgets.

Dismantling barriers means we will find it easier to –

- give and receive gifts worldwide
- learn from and teach others
- receive and send people across the world
- welcome and visit internationally
- emphasise, encourage and share the suffering and celebration of a world-wide church

Whether those world citizens are in the next village or on the furthest island makes no difference because, **mission starts at the end of the pew and extends to the ends of the earth.**

### ***Close the Missionary Prayer Meeting***

Christians are reluctant to close down good things. No one would argue that prayer is not good, but we must sometimes close down good things in the cause of producing something better. There is a prevailing church culture with regard to world mission that has to be changed. Trying harder rarely changes a culture - something new, revolutionary and drastic needs to be introduced.

I have already said that the marginalisation of world mission is rampant in our churches. The Missionary Prayer Meeting is usually the clearest indication of that marginalisation. In most churches, few attend, most have grey hair and the women considerably outnumber the men. Information comes from out-of-date missionary magazines and coded prayer letters – only the in-group know the code! The prayers follow a long established evangelical prayer format – eyes closed, heads bowed, with little speeches separated by the word 'Amen' and periods of dead space, to use a radio term. Those who attend give the appearance of being very knowledgeable and very holy.

The result is that everyone else resists the missionary prayer meeting like the plague. Those involved don't mean to be unwelcoming, but they are!

Close it down. The culture that maintains that an interest in the world is the prerogative of a small select band of world mission keenies has to go. The few who have been involved in the Missionary Prayer Meeting will still pray, but concern for the world needs to be seen to be relevant to every aspect of church life. Pray at every and any church function for issues relating to God's world. Don't restrict it to 'world mission'. Pray for the concerns that are provoked by our TV screens. A church in England I visited in June was praying imaginatively for Sweden, Argentina and Nigeria. I wonder why?

### ***Maximise information availability***

Information and choice are the fundamental ingredients of the new paradigm in which we are moving. From where do you get your information about the world? As I hinted last time, most Christians get

their information in two hermetically sealed compartments. Each day they receive information from a newspaper and through the TV news. Like the rest of their media input, it fits into the secular part of their lives.

The other information about the world comes through missionary magazines, Christian videos and prayer letters. This is the religious bit – to be prayed about and only discussed among the saints.

For young people and an increasing number of older people today, the latest information doesn't come through print at all, but from the TV or computer screen. The Internet provides unlimited information that, as those concerned for the world, we need to make use of.

Young people love surfing the net. There are many different opinions and chat rooms which allow people to present their own opinion and respond to others. The Internet is so significant as a source of information that we need to get our churches linked up.

Why not suggest this as a weekly procedure –

- 1 On Monday or Tuesday the church leader chooses a topical issue from the world news.
- 2 Choose a young person with web access to find out about it from the Internet.
- 3 Get relevant information printed out, stored on a disk or identified so it can be displayed live when the church meets.
- 4 Pray together relevantly, topically and appropriately about issues that everyone knows something about.

You will be amazed how many young people are happy to surf the net with a purpose in view. This world is God's world, information and opinion about it is important as we work together to build the Kingdom.

### ***Re-position the Great Commission***

If your church is committed to world mission because of the Great Commission, then think again. There are verses in the Bible that we know TOO well and the result is that we end up as unbalanced and immature Christians – Matthew 28:18-20, which is one version of the Great Commission is one such passage.

Throughout the Bible we find pieces of the 'Go' jigsaw. There are so many pieces that the 'go' picture is one of the major strands that runs through the whole of the Biblical record. It starts at the beginning of Genesis and can be found in every book of the Old Testament. God is concerned for a fallen world and he sends. Firstly we read how he sends himself to the Garden of Eden and the tower of Babel in Genesis. Then he sends his representatives – Abraham, Moses and Jonah, for instance, as part of the great rescue plan for those who need saving.

Finally he sends his Son. "This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him." (1 John 4:9)

These pieces of the 'go' jigsaw, make the picture clear – God has had a mission plan to reach lost humanity. The final piece of the jigsaw comes in final words of Jesus that we call the Great Commission. It is important because it completes the picture, but the picture is clear before we ever get to the last piece! The picture tells of the character of a God's who sends himself and sends his followers to reach a fallen world, which he loves so much.

If we start with the Great Commission, we concentrate on our failure to meet the needs of people. This creates a guilt complex about world mission which has been so unhelpful in our churches. If each church mission event re-emphasises a feeling of guilt, no wonder people choose to do something else! Rather we should concentrate on explaining the whole of Scripture and teaching that a healthy church is a sending church because it reflects the character of God.

## ***Form a World Issue Committee***

Many churches have a World Missionary Committee or World Mission Group. Their responsibility is usually to encourage interest in world mission and to provide a link with 'missionaries'. Sometimes even their existence is a barrier to a church thinking more broadly about God's world and our concern for it.

'World mission' has become a major turn off for many Christians. It is associated with poor presentations, out-of-touch and over zealous missionaries, unrealistic missionary biographies and a guilt complex over the 'plight of the heathen'.

In contrast, world knowledge, interest and concerns are all increasing. Many people have become vegetarians because of their concern about the world. There is a growth in commitment to fair-traded goods. More and more people will not buy things produced in certain countries or manufactured by non-ethical companies. People know more about the world than ever before and care about world issues.

Our churches need to encourage this and build on Christians' commitment to the world environment. We then need to insist that this is God's world and he is concerned too. Many peoples' concern for the world is completely divorced from their faith. But not only is God concerned, but there are Christians around the world suffering directly because of the issues. There are ways we can help with humanitarian aid as well as in evangelism and church building.

But if our response and involvement arises from our concern for world issues and not just as a response to a guilt trip about spiritual needs, we are likely to involve more people and particularly those who are younger.

So launch a world issue committee in your church. If there are overseas workers to be cared for that could happen by the same people who care for other staff – remember the home/field barrier has to go.