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Introduction

Mission has a history, at least in recent times of being heroic. Look at the books published on mission – biographies of people who dared great things for God. I was reading recently about a missionary woman who whilst she spent most of her time in Africa was greeted with huge public expectation when she returned home for a visit. People wanted to hear the latest daring, the latest adventures and yes, the latest victories in spreading the gospel worldwide. Missionaries were not “normal” Christians they were super-Christians who were courageous with their faith, who did not fear the unknown or arduous living. They were very spiritual, with unwavering faith in God, and had a greater awareness of Him and His presence than other people in “secular work”. I am conscious that I paint a picture that some missionaries from previous generations would be uncomfortable with but I would suggest that there was not enough of them that were uncomfortable enough to challenge it in the public arena.

Here we explore the area of expectations that people have of missionaries. What do people expect them to do and to be? How do supporters, churches and colleagues expect them to behave? How do missionaries perceive the expectations of others, for the perception and reality are often different as we shall explore. How do we measure success? What is fruitful? When we look at missionaries how do we measure their success and equally important if we are missionaries how do we measure success for ourselves?

Key findings¹

We asked over 60 students preparing at mission training college a series of questions about their expectations of mission.

We asked about their concerns as they entered into mission:

- 78% expressed concern about living an “observed lifestyle”
- 84% expressed concern about living up to the expectations of supporters
- 62% fear they will be a failure in their ministry
- 79% had some concern about the adequacy of their skills
- 73% were concerned about the inadequacy of their character
- 67% were concerned about compromising their principles and settling for surviving rather than thriving

We asked what they expected of their future role and ministry:

- 70% were concerned that others would have unrealistic expectations of them

We asked about their call and role:

- Only 8% of respondents expect to become heroic figures

¹ For a fuller explanation of the study see the Editorial.

Exploring the results

Is it surprising that only 8% of respondents expect to become hero figures? Possibly not – humility would tend to militate against this, however 61% said that they certainly don't expect to be hero figures and the other 31% think it unlikely. Perhaps even more convincing of an anti-hero sentiment is the fact that 78% expressed concern about living an “observed lifestyle”. People who want to be heroes do not get concerned about such things. They relish the idea of someone watching them – just look at all the people that apply for reality TV shows knowing that many programmes sell themselves on making their contestants look foolish! However, what does this reticence for being the object of people's attention and scrutiny mean for the traditional view of witness as living before people to demonstrate an alternate lifestyle? Perhaps we would think this reflects Western individualism about both being scrutinised and seeking to challenge others through what we do or don't do (not a tolerant way of living). It may reflect that, but certainly some of those most concerned about this were not from the West.

This cohort is not seeking fame. They have a sense of call that they want to follow through on but if they make a big song and dance about it they raise expectations and 84% expressed concern about living up to the expectations of supporters with 48% being slightly concerned, 29% quite concerned and 6% very concerned. Why do they feel that supporters will have such high expectations? Perhaps because they are told to have such high expectations, in church sermons, missionary talks and mission publications. Perhaps because consciously or unconsciously we equate faith with achievement. This link is another of the many symptoms of the churches whole-scale acceptance of modernist values. Looking more widely 70% were concerned that others (generally not just supporters) would have unrealistic expectations of them with 57% being quite concerned and 13% very concerned.

In the editorial I said that whilst this cohort was pragmatic enough to cope, they were far from rampant individualists. In fact they are a very self-doubting group with 62% saying they fear they will be a failure in their ministry. I guess this means there are 38% that are not concerned about being a failure in their ministry but with 56% slightly concerned, 5% quite concerned and 2% very concerned we do have a picture of a group that is far from believing they are God's gift for any particular situation! However, the more I ponder that result, the less I am worried by it. We have often been criticised in history as Christians for having no self-doubt and thinking we had all the answers, and so perhaps it is helpful and healthy that we are conscious of our own humanness and frailty? Whilst we worship, serve and seek to declare a glorious and perfect God, we do so as broken vessels limited by the brokenness of our lives and the world around us. Indeed perhaps if we can overcome our reticence to be observed, showing we are imperfect and revealing our struggles may communicate more to the world around us. It does seem to be a world which after all seems positively enthralled by the struggles in people's lives and able to forgive and indeed go on respecting people in spite of their failings. More so perhaps than a perfect life that seems too good to be true and hides the failures in private. Certainly scripture suggests that the Holy Spirit can use the weaknesses we have to display the power and glory of God at work.

The nature of possible failings seems to cover many areas. A significant number were concerned about their skills being inadequate (this is discussed in detail in one of the other papers). 73% were concerned that their character would prove inadequate with 53% slightly concerned, 16% quite concerned and 3% very concerned. This reflects a concern I saw in some focus group work amongst a similar group a few years ago. I had asked them how long they felt called to serve in mission and then how long they would commit to at interview. The difference was huge: the length of service was 20 years to lifetime and yet they would, almost without exception, only commit to 3 years service with an organisation. When I asked

them to explain it became clear that it was not a commitment issue but rather an integrity issue. They wanted to commit to something that they would see through. They knew they might not cope with culture shock, they may not cope with the role, their family might not cope or there could be a hundred other unexpected reasons. They knew all that, they were not naïve, and yet they wanted to honour their commitment – their main concern was to fail to honour their word. Linked to the other concern, namely that 67% were concerned about compromising their principles and settling for surviving rather than thriving, it would seem that contrary to the valueless, uncommitted picture often painted of Gen X and Millennials, they are actually very principled and want to strive to live to those principles out.

Reflection, Considerations and Challenges

There are some significant issues here for us to consider. How do these things impact our current pattern and practice of mission?

What might this reticence to be the centre of attention mean for the current style and ethos of mission magazines who present the regular pattern of missionary challenge, missionary profile, and missionary success story? How different is the tone of our mission magazines and the publicity we use from your tabloid reality TV show? Are we guilty of hyping it up?

Is there a reality gap that we need to do more to address? If the mission organisations are aware that mission at the start of the twenty-first century is on the whole different to the pioneering picture of 100 years ago, what are we doing to change the picture that supporters have? Mission is largely assisting others to do, rather than doing yourself. It is allowing others to make decisions and limiting your input to offering advice and support. This approach takes more time and it requires people who are both able to walk with and follow, rather than lead.

In the focus group we conducted for this study, it was clear that this cohort were deeply unhappy about communicating a picture of mission that did not match their lived reality and yet what if we do communicate the true picture? Will supporters stop giving? Do we dare not challenge that unrealistic and outdated image that many supporters have in case the modern reality is not as lucrative as the imagined one? Perhaps the lack of support from younger Christians (say under 45) to traditional mission agencies is because they do not feel what they are being asked to support is real enough! It is a very difficult one because if the expectations are so different of what mission is, you will struggle and probably never succeed to meet the expectations of both parties – the gap is just too wide.

The concern expressed in several places in the results about meeting expectations of others is, I would suggest, rooted in this reality gap.

Conclusions

The problem with all research is that it may give you some answers but it always gives dozens more questions. However, I do think we have one very clear picture. I started by asking where have all the heroes gone? A hero is defined:

1. In mythology and legend, a man, often of divine ancestry, who is endowed with great courage and strength, celebrated for his bold exploits, and favoured by the gods.

2. A person noted for feats of courage or nobility of purpose, especially one who has risked or sacrificed his or her life²

Compare that to the definition of servant:

1. One who expresses submission, recognizance³, or debt to another

It would seem that the heroes are not to be found. But it would seem that there are many seeking to be servants, recognising that they may struggle and fail but seeking to serve nevertheless. Perhaps what this lack of heroes means practically is that supporters need to become just that – supporters and not spectators. People who rather than just gasping in awe, seek to empathise with and encourage. To help those they support to step out in greater faith.

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² www.thefreedictionary.com

³ An obligation of record that is entered into before a court or magistrate, containing a condition to perform a particular act, such as making a court appearance