

## Making sense of Europe and its unique challenges for mission preparation



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Over the last few years since being back in Europe after a spell in Asia, I have had a growing sense of the challenge that Europe presents for the Gospel. It is not a blinding revelation or a “word of knowledge” (there are people far better placed to present that challenge than me) but having been in a culture that was not familiar (Asia), and returning to one that was not as familiar as it had been before (Western Europe), there were things that stood out as they had not done before. Also I had, had to think the gospel into Asian culture on a day by day basis and now tried to do the same in a culture that I had previously just taken for granted.

As I wrestled with these issues, I began to wonder how well we were preparing missionary candidates for mission in Europe. There were a growing number of Redcliffe students each year; some who came from Europe and wished to return to work there on completion of their studies and others from different parts of the world planning to move to Europe. What were we teaching these people? Were not the standard cross-cultural skills and self-awareness that we teach to all candidates, applicable in Europe? Perhaps, but application is important and so I decided to find out how many case studies, illustration and examples, I and my colleagues, used from Europe in our courses. The answer was zero! We had spent over 100 years preparing mission candidates for Africa, Asia and Latin America but it seemed we had not seen Europe as a recipient only as a source for mission.

How different was Europe to the rest of the world, to Africa, Asia or Latin America? What was unique, what was similar and what was the same? As I began to seek answers, I quickly realised that there were very few “experts” out there, very few books written (particularly when compared to the myriads of books on mission principles ad praxis elsewhere in the world) and something of a gap in research and resource. To attempt to fill this vacuum, I gathered together a cross section of people with different insights and experiences in European mission:

- Ruth Robinson – Greater Europe Mission, Mission Partner and sociologist.
- Darrell Jackson – Conference of European Churches, Researcher in European Mission and Evangelism,
- Richard Tiplady – European Christian Mission, UK Director
- Martin Thomas – CMS, Regional Manager, Western Europe
- Peter Knowlson – ECM Spain, Cordoba Team Leader
- Fabiano Fernandes – ECM Portugal, Field Leader and Portugal Bible Institute, Principal
- Gordon Showell-Rogers – European Evangelical Alliance, General Secretary
- Jeff Fountain – YWAM Europe Director and Leader of Hope for Europe

*(I am immensely grateful to all these people who have given of their time, energy and experience so freely in the ongoing discussions I have with them on this issue.)*

This one day gathering was not a conference of experts but rather, it was like the Indian fable of the blind men gathered around an elephant each trying to explain to the others what they were feeling and to piece it together into a cohesive picture of the beast. That does mean that in this issue of Encounters, one writer may describe a tree trunk, as they explore and explain the animal’s stout and sturdy legs, whilst another is convinced he has a rope in his hands when he is holding the tail. Not all the descriptions here agree completely and some may seem to contradict each other.

This is also the start of the journey rather than the conclusion. What we share here are the papers that fuelled our discussions that day and the start we have made on addressing the issue of preparation practically at Redcliffe. We share it with the invitation that others help us by commenting on what we have discovered and done so far and join us on this journey to make sense of what Europe, home of the Reformation - that has shaped in helpful and unhelpful ways, so much of our faith, requires at this time. I leave you with a quote from Duncan MacLaren's excellent book- *Mission Implausible*. (Look out for a review of in an issue of *Encounters* later in the year) He highlights for me, the complexities we face in Europe.

Although many of the major indices of religiosity continued to plummet at an alarming rate, in the last two decades it has become clear that there are other things going on besides decline: Europeans have not abandoned Christian beliefs in the way that was predicted; a huge majority of the British still call themselves Christian; across Europe, confidence in the churches is rising; in cultural terms we are still a Christian continent; religion is increasingly on the public agenda; and from some unexpected quarters, new forms of Christianity are rising from the ashes of the burnt out churches of Europe. This leaves us with a paradox that even sociologists find hard to describe: at a time that the church in Europe is facing a crisis of unprecedented proportions, defiant green shoots of religious revitalisation are pushing up through the snow-shroud of moribund religion. Christianity is not about to disappear: the question now is, in what form will it survive? (MacLaren, 2004 pviii)

As a missiologist, for me the question alongside that is – given that Christianity in Europe is changing beyond all recognition from its historic form, how should mission change? It's present, historically shaped, form has served us well in the past and perhaps continues to serve us well in other parts of the world, but now we need something that can be relevant and effective in sharing the good news in twenty first century Europe. To that end we have three papers that unpack cultural, religious and mission agency contexts in Europe today.

MacLaren, D. (2004) *Mission Implausible: Restoring Credibility to the Church*, Milton Keynes, Paternoster Press.

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