

Re-evangelising Europe: More of the same or something new?



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Does the evangelisation of Europe simply require more of what we have done before or is it a unique situation needing a unique approach?

Introduction

I don't know about you but I draw great encouragement from the stories I hear from God's global church about growth, miracles and the like. It is exciting to hear that God is at work and sometimes it is a breath of fresh air when the latest statistics have just been aired about how such and such a British denomination is losing members like a flood. But, and this is a big BUT, I have a growing sense of unease with those that go on in the next sentence to berate me as a Western Christian for not having enough faith to see the same here and offer to send some missionaries to Britain who can "do the stuff".

The answer they suggest is usually either powerful knock you down preaching, miraculous raise you up healing or perhaps challenging and prophetic foretelling of the future or declaration of a hidden sin. The implication is that we don't have the faith to do any of these and if we did then all our problems would be solved! Why – is this the only true and legitimate form of ministry in their view? Certainly it is often how God is acting in their own country. In many parts of the world, including those that we in the West have traditionally sent people to, the church is growing fast and signs and wonders are accompanying the preaching of the Gospel.

Praise God that he is acting like that there, and I confess I do often struggle to pray "in faith" for a seriously ill person to be healed, even more so for them to be raised once they have died. But I am not convinced that even if I had the faith and "did the stuff" that they would seriously be affected by it except perhaps on the physical level. I feel like Jesus when he said "Even if I did miraculous signs for them they would not believe in me".

State of the nation(s)

Peter Brierley's report on the state of the English church was always going to make sobering reading, not least because it is called "The tide is running out"¹. In it he says:

'The numbers in this book show a haemorrhage akin to a burst artery. The country is littered with people who used to go to church but no longer do.' 'we could literally be one generation from extinction'

His research is sound, the analysis good and conclusion stark and a vital part of establishing the state of the patient but as Brierley would point out it is not a diagnosis. We know how fast the patient is dying but not what is causing the deterioration.

¹ Brierley, P, The Tide Is Running Out: What the English Church Attendance Survey Reveals, Christian Research: London, 2000

Jeff Fountain², using a different analogy calls into question whether we are actually mistaken in trying to prevent the death. He uses the image of twilight but suggests that we misunderstand what it represents. He says that it is not the twilight of Christianity that we are viewing but rather modernity and therefore with it Christendom as the 'modern' expression of Christianity that we have all grown up with and often assume to be its only form.

Indeed it appears to be the case that familiarity has bred contempt, not as we usually think of; everyone being too familiar with Christian things to take them seriously but rather the church has become too familiar with Western culture and mistakes the death of modernity for that of Christianity. Darrel Jackson's article in the last issue of Encounters³, highlighted how across Europe the majority of the population in the majority of countries considered themselves to be Christian but were repulsed by institutional Christendom. (The issue of what forms of Christianity – individualised/institutionalised etc. are valid, is beyond the scope of this paper but a very relevant question is: Do Christians from the Global South only view institutionalised Christianity as valid because that was what they were given by the missionaries who came to them?)

Proactive receiving

It is over 200 years since Carey's call to mission launched us into this current missionary movement. In that time Christianity has gone from being a largely Western institution to a global faith movement. There are now not just churches on every continent but in many villages, towns and cities on those continents, however, when Carey began his mission work that was not the case. He had no church to work with in any of the places to which he went. He did not have a reference point, friendly face or guide to explain cultural practices, church workings or simply to make introductions, for there was no pre-existing Christian presence. Now in many places we do. Now we attempt to work in partnership with national churches, local believers and on the ground initiatives. In many places mission agencies have local staff teaching new mission partners not just language but also orientation: helping to explain the culture they have entered.

Coming to the West is no different. We the 'natives' need to help newly arrived missionaries, to understand what is going on: just because someone has learnt English, for example, does not mean they know British culture. With English having become the 'lingua franca' of the 21st Century, there seems to be an assumption that making sense of Western culture is an ability everyone is now born with. Perhaps there is the thought that with 80% of TV programming in many areas of the non-Western world being produced in the West that should suffice, but whilst MTV is a useful lesson on some aspects of Westernisation it is not sufficient. In the West, most of us would say that even we who wrestle with and live in Western culture on a daily basis struggle to understand and make sense of what is going on. Just recently I was talking with a friend who had Japanese work colleagues visiting the UK office and she related how much they were struggling because they did not understand the 'rules' and were completely thrown when told that that was because there were very few 'rules' in the sense of cultural norms and expectations. So if we are struggling to make sense of the rules, the culture, a newcomer is bound to find it bewildering.

² Fountain, J, Living as people of Hope: Faith, hope and vision for 21st century Europe, Initialmedia: Rotterdam, 2004

³ Jackson, D, Beyond the Preamble: Searching for God in a secularising Europe, Encounters Issue 6, June 2005

As the 'national receiving church', I believe we have a key part to play. We need to be proactive receivers, not passive recipients. We need to embrace and welcome but also to guide and explain. Some practical things we might need to consider:

- Help them become part of the church scene.
- Help them understand cultural aspects of life in Europe
- Be open about our difficulties in doing mission in our own places. It is not easy to hold up our hands and say what we have tried and what has failed. In Christian circles and particularly mission I think we sometimes talk about our successes quite freely but tend to pray quietly about our failures.

Cross-culturally prepared going

Brian Stanley's, *The Bible and the Flag* is a pretty fair evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of Christian mission in relation to imperialism and highlights some of the many ways in which we ignored culture and imposed Western values, behaviour and culture on others. I know we continue to do that today in different ways, often despite our best intentions. I am also conscious that sometimes there is a place to challenge a cultural aspect, as missionaries did in their early days with the Indian practice of Sati (widow burning), and as I sought myself to do in Nepal with aspects of fatalism and karma that bred a disinclination to help the poor and the sick. Some of the greatest achievements of missionaries down through the recent centuries have been through challenging cultural norms and yet as Stanley and others have shown, some of the greatest misunderstandings, wars and cultural destruction has been wrought by missionaries and others who have ignored or worse, disregarded culture.

Now we spend much time in Western mission colleges like Redcliffe, helping people become culturally aware. Not just aware of the culture they are heading to but also of their own culture. Helping them to become self-aware: self awareness is not an ethereal New-Age concept aimed at reaching some higher plane, rather it is almost the opposite: seeking to bring people down from any lofty notions of the superiority of their own culture and way of life and helping them see it with its weaknesses as well as its strengths. We try to help them to understand the assumptions they make because of their culture and upbringing. To use a phrase of one of my old lecturers, 'to help people take off the glasses they did not know they were wearing, and realise what colour tint they were giving to the view'. So my question is: in what ways are missionaries to the West being prepared for their cross-cultural experience?

Conclusion – Humble interdependence

We have the means to do better! We always can do better in my experience and that stops me from ever getting too triumphalistic and it also keeps me searching for improvements. Just because we made significant mistakes in doing mission from the 'West to the Rest' should not mean we have to repeat those as we now see mission from the 'Rest to the West'. Mission 'from Everywhere to Everywhere' portrays an image in my mind of reciprocity. It is a difficult word to pronounce and sometime to understand so let me give an example. Much to my wife's horror I was recently teaching my four year old to use a hacksaw. As we each held an end and attempted to saw through a small length of pipe I explained to him how we had to work together. I emphasised the need for us to get the

timing right: he pulls when I push and vice versa. I tried to explain that we each need to put equal effort into the work and how when a rhythm develops it suddenly becomes much smoother, easier and more efficient to cut. After a lot of puffing and blowing and a scratched finger from slipping when it got stuck, we finally made it through the pipe. As we admired our handiwork I explained that before chainsaws were invented people used to use giant saws with a team of men at each end of the saw and that these could actually cut huge trees down. What I had just explained to my 4 year old was that they could achieve much more together practicing reciprocity.

My hope is that we can, at the start of the 21st Century, do mission in a spirit of reciprocity. We are attempting to be better at working in international teams, at working with nationals and under national church structures... in non-Western countries. We attempt to help people understand culture and contextualise the gospel and their work to it... in non-Western cultures. Do we have to have two hundred years of mistakes and cultural blunders in mission from the 'Rest to the West' just because we had it in mission from the 'West to the Rest'. We in the West are as aware as anyone, and more than most that we need something new from God in Europe but I believe that it probably is something new, not just something that has worked elsewhere. Jeff Fountain, Europe Director of YWAM has described Europe as 'the prodigal nation'; it is not a fatherless nation in need of adoption but rather one that has been resident in the Father's house for a millennium but has now departed in search of bright lights and fresh experiences. To make sense of this unique situation we need all of the energies and insights of the global church but we also need a humble interdependence such as we have rarely if ever achieved.

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