

Singing the Lord's song in a foreign land - mission in post-modern Britain

(from International Christian College)

I sat across the room from a minister nearing retirement, at a conference on mission in contemporary society. With a tone of sadness in his voice he said, "I no longer recognise the culture in which I live". And the penny dropped. My wife and I had been missionaries in Japan for ten years, and had not long returned to a much-changed UK. We felt so out of touch with the society around us, just as we had felt ten years earlier when we first arrived in Japan. Culture shock in our own country! But that minister's comment made me realise that it wasn't just us. In many ways Christians who had spent all their lives in the UK were experiencing a form of culture shock as well, struggling to understand and communicate with people in a society very different from even a generation ago. Like so many missionaries returned to the UK, people like Leslie Newbigin and David Smith, I realised that the church here would have to change radically in the way it approached its mission here. The phrase which trips off people's lips "We're all missionaries really" would need to be taken seriously, as the church starts to think about what it means to engage missionally with, in effect, a new culture in Britain.

The first stage of any missionary encounter with people of another culture must be observing and understanding their culture. And what are the marks of this different Britain? Space prevents a full analysis, but here are some of the key features.

Firstly, we live in a **fragmented** culture. By this I don't just mean one in which lots of relationships have broken down, but one in which there is increasingly little sense of common identity despite differences of age, gender, class,

background and so on. Instead, people are far more conscious of belonging to groups of like-minded people. This may be seen in the various youth tribes of Goths, moshers, skaters and so on, or in the different and poorly-integrated ethnic and religious communities which mark out Britain as a plural society, but it is also seen in the huge range of choices in everything from yoghurt to digital TV channels. A generation ago, over half the country watched the Morecambe and Wise Christmas Specials. Now if a programme attracts 12 million viewers it is counted a huge hit. There will still be conversations about the weekend's television over the water cooler in the office, in the pub or in the playground, but it will not be about the same programmes. Both at the level of popular culture and at the deeper level of shared beliefs or identity, there is little commonality.

Secondly we live in a **disillusioned** culture. For some this is because they are aware of being in the country's economic underclass. For many it is the more general sense that all the big dreams of previous generations of solving all the world's problems by science or by religion have proved empty. Science, it is felt, may have given us Myspace and painless dentistry, but it has also given us global warming and the threat of nuclear or biological terrorism. And all religion does is to cause violence...or so it is claimed.

In turn this loss of hope in the future has caused us instead to **live for the present**, and to try to numb the mundane existence of life and work by shopping, drinking, drugging, and taking foreign holidays, preferably all at the same time.

The loss of shared identity and belief makes it much harder to have an agreed set of values. Instead, we make moral and ethical **decisions based largely on self-interest or at best family interest**. Small wonder then that we find it so hard to get on together.

And in the midst of this **Britain has forgotten the Christian story**. A combination of social and intellectual challenges from outside has led to increasing secularisation, and churches, by and large, have been unsure how to respond to this loss of influence. When my farther-in-law was at school he was belted if he forgot to do his Bible reading homework. When I was at primary school in the late 1960s all but two children in my class went to Sunday school. In primary school classes today it is rare if more than two children do attend. Many churches are virtually empty of anyone under the age of 30. We can therefore no longer assume that people will know what we mean when we talk about the Noah's Ark, the Exodus, the Exile, the Gospels, the Easter story, Jesus or even God.

These are some of the marks of a society we call post-modern. Yet we should understand that "post-modern" is a descriptive word, not a value judgment. We must not simply see post-modern society as negative or opposed to the gospel. There are actually many positive things about post-modern society as well. Post-modern people are more tolerant, more concerned about the environment, less willing to leave problems for other people to fix and more likely to try to make a difference themselves, less willing to pretend things are all right when they are not, and more concerned to find genuine communities to be part of. The

Bible and the history of the church tell us that the gospel can take root and bear fruit in any culture...including post-modern Britain. They also tell us that the form of the church is likely to be a bit different to what it looks like elsewhere. So, what should mark our mission and witness in post-modern Britain?

Firstly we need to learn to **look and listen** before speaking. A rather cynical T-shirt slogan a few years ago said "Jesus is the answer - but what's the question?". Prophetic indeed! Christians need to beware of thinking themselves so sure that we know what others need to hear that we actually fail to hear ourselves the questions that they are asking, and thus do not see how they are seeking God. Just as Paul in Athens (Acts 17: 16-34) saw the altar to the unknown god as a gospel bridge into Athenian culture and recognised that the Greek poets also pointed to God, so we should seek to discern the ways in which God has gone ahead of us into this new culture. We may find these bridges in the positive values of post-modern society such as a longing for community or a desire to care for God's world, or we may find in the hurt and disillusionment that result from a turning away from His values.

Secondly, our witness should be **characterised by love**. This is not to downplay the reality of sin nor the need for conversion. However, it may be that hurting, disillusioned people need to find the kindness that leads to repentance (Romans 2:4). They will find this in a community which welcomes them as they are, and helps them see what, in Christ, they could be.

Thirdly, in a fragmented society our mission should be **local**. However, we need to remember that "local" may not necessarily refer to a particular place. In villages and small towns peoples' community may well be geographical, but in urban settings people's communities will be their place of work, or their gym, or their pub or club. Christians need to connect with these network-based communities...and churches need to

resource Christians to be witnesses within these communities rather than the more common practice of trying to extract people to come out of their communities to come to hear the Gospel on the Christians' own territory. One of the marks of missionaries after all is their willingness to go where people are rather than

Finally, we should remember that our witness may need to be **long**, particularly in a society where people have little or no knowledge of the Christian story and thus start much further back than did those of two or three generations ago. There are some wonderful stories of Jesus suddenly breaking into people's lives, but for many folk their journey to faith is precisely that - a journey over time, a journey of experiences and of learning to make sense of these experiences in the light of the gospel. We often look at Paul's conversion as the model for a "proper" conversion, but it may be that we should look again at Peter's three year journey, with all its ups and downs and false starts. The challenge for Christians today is to be willing to accompany people as they journey towards the One who is already calling them.

Psalm 137 records a cry of despair as the exiles from Israel were dragged into captivity in the strange new culture of Babylon. "How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" In the psalm this is a rhetorical question, and the feeling is "We can't". Yet among their number were Daniel and his friends - who did learn how to "sing the lord's song" in pagan Babylon, and so well that Nebuchadnezzar himself acknowledged their God. (Read the whole of the book of Daniel if you don't know the story!). Christians in Britain, facing a strange new culture, do not need to follow the despair in the psalm. Instead they need to cultivate fresh confidence in Daniel's God who will make Himself known in any and every culture.

For further reading
Graham Tomlin The Provocative Church (SPCK)
Stuart Murray Post-Christendom (Authentic Media)
and Church after Christendom (Paternoster)
David Smith Moving Towards Emmaus (SPCK)



Mr. David Miller

Area of Ministry: Academic Staff

Job Title: Lecturer in Mission Studies

Email: david.miller@icc.ac.uk

After training at BTI, David and his wife Jeanette joined OMF International, spending nearly ten years in Japan. They worked with students and with a Japanese church. Following their return from Japan David took a Masters degree in Non-Western Christianity at Edinburgh University, before joining ICC in September 1998. He is pursuing PhD research into conversion in Japan. His three children were all "made in Japan". He is a council member of Wycliffe Bible Translators (Scotland) and OMF International. And he supports Celtic!