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Reverse mission in the Western context

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The new missional movement experienced in Europe has been called 'reverse mission'. The process of immigration and the need of mainstream Churches to bring personnel from the Global South has engendered a very creative and dynamic missional practice in the Church in the West. The Methodist Church in Britain (MCB) has been a pioneer in bringing mission partners to this country with the intention of exchanging experience, culture, pastoral and theological practices and mission. This article reflects on the concept of reverse mission and also the contribution of the author as a mission partner to the MCB. The experience demonstrates that any cultural exchange challenges us to take an incarnational and contextualised approach to fulfil God's mission in the world.

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> Then Jesus came to them and said, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age. (Mt 28:18–20, NIV)

Introduction

I grew up in a Brazilian Pentecostal Church hearing good stories about the experiences of missionaries who came over from Europe and North America bringing the 'true' message to our country. They were men and women who left their comfort zones to serve in a country where most people were influenced by Roman Catholicism through Portuguese colonisation. Western Protestantism had established a mission presence from the 1810s, which included Anglicans, Baptists, Congregationalists, Lutherans, Methodists and Presbyterian missionaries.

The main paradigm was that the Southern Hemisphere was a mission field with high potential to develop a great Christian influence in the world. In some respects, the Protestant or 'evangelical' (as they are called in Brazil) Churches developed very well, becoming a large Christian presence in the country. The result of this has been that a country like Brazil, instead of receiving missionaries, is now sending them all over the world.

When I was engaged in my theological education at the beginning of the 1990s I joined the Methodist Church. Researching its development, I learned that the Church had a close connection with the United Methodist Church in the USA because of the many American missionaries who came over to serve in the country.

Looking at my Church's participation in overseas mission, it is evident that in the 1980s the Methodist Church in Brazil began to contribute more effectively to world mission, sending missionaries to Western countries such as Portugal, Germany, the USA, Switzerland and Spain, and in 2006 I was sent to serve The Methodist Church in Britain (MCB) through the World Church Partnership in Britain (WCPB).

Mission partners are invited to serve in different parts of this country and offer their mission contributions to British Methodism. From this experience of

becoming a mission partner, the concept of reverse mission became a reality in my own ministry. The question in my mind was: Is Britain a mission field? Is Christianity still a relevant religion for people in the West?

Those questions were part of my reflection in my interaction with British people and they challenged me to respond pastorally, theologically, missionally and culturally. In my early days in this country, many people asked me why I had left my country to live in a place where the weather is cold and wet. When I answered that I was a missionary, people could not 'get it' easily. They said, 'No! We send missionaries abroad, we are a Christian country.' I thought, 'Is that true?'

Comprehending reverse mission

The phenomenon of reverse mission has challenged many Churches and mission agencies to consider the extent of its impact in the Western context. This relates to the established practice in Christian religious experience of going forth and sharing the faith with others who do not know the gospel or have lost interest in Christianity. The missional imperative in Matthew 28 encourages Christians to reflect on the engagement of spreading the gospel everywhere, as Michael Nazir-Ali highlights.[1] However, the dynamic of carrying out mission by people from different cultures and backgrounds challenges any traditional ecclesiology to adapt itself to this religious phenomenon.

For many decades the flow of mission work has been mainly from the West to the South. However, several authorities have discussed the shift of the centre of gravity of Christianity from the Northern to the Southern Hemisphere. The first was Andrew Walls in *The Missionary Movement in Christian History* (1996). This was followed and endorsed by Werner Kahl and Philip Jenkins, and has created a new shape, dynamic and interaction within worldwide mission fields.[2]

The mission work done by people from Southern regions has established a new movement that some scholars have named 'reverse mission' or 'mission in reverse'. Hun Kim defines this:

> Indeed, reverse mission in the 21st century is part and parcel of the transfer of initiative in mission to the non-Western world as non-Western churches are at the forefront of missionary work around the world. In turn, contribution to reverse mission is a result of incidental mission by non-Western missionaries and ministers or migrant lay

> people through their Diaspora networks … Reverse mission is when non-Western churches return with the Gospel to societies that initially brought the Gospel to them. This flows from a true sense of debt for the Gospel and for the purpose of building capacity for working in world mission together.[3]

Every new term for expressing given social and religious phenomena initiates some form of controversy and this one is no different. Rebecca Catto highlighted 'the historical shift', with Christian missionaries now coming from countries that were traditionally receivers of mission, to work in countries which were traditionally senders of missionaries.[4] Afe Adogame describes this as a process of significant religious, social, political and missiological import within the non-Western world, particularly Africa, Asia and Latin America.[5]

The question that derives from this phenomenon is: Does reverse mission represent a result of migrational movement or an intentional plan from Churches in the South sending missionaries to re-evangelise the West, or both?

There are at least three aspects to consider. First is to analyse the mission movement in the context of the diaspora of those who came over to work after the First and Second World Wars to support the reconstruction of cities in Europe, especially in the UK. Second is the missional initiative by Churches in the Southern Hemisphere sending personnel to support mainline Churches or planting new churches with the intention of bringing the gospel back to a secular Western context. The third aspect concerns Churches who have links in a worldwide organisation and who exchange personnel, bringing a wider view of Christianity into their context. This point is going to be explored through the MCB's experiences.

For many years, Western mission to developing countries was done in places where the social, political and economic reasons were great and some of the missionaries were able to do their work with both aspects in view, both the spiritual and the social. According to Nazir-Ali, this is perhaps the first time in centuries that Christian mission is not following the traditional ways of Western missionaries to Southern mission fields.[6]

The fact is, as Adogame highlights, 'the western world is therefore faced with the arrival of so-called "indigenous" religions in cross-fertilization with contextualized Christian interpretations on its own shores'.[7] Philip Jenkins mentions that this movement is focusing on the West. In his understanding, the future of Christianity's standing in Western Europe can be impacted by the presence

of non-European immigrants.[8] Looking at church growth in relation to the rise of Black Churches,[9] it is evident that many mission developments have originated from those who were part of the immigration process from the Caribbean and Africa and subsequently from other parts of the globe as well.

The immigration movement has a clear impact on reverse mission. People do not just migrate to a new place, they also bring their culture, religion and expectations. It is a phenomenon that takes in a whole spectrum of human interaction. Thus, Western Christianity is challenged by interaction with a more hybrid experience. In other words, Southern people who received the gospel from the West are capable of sharing their religious understanding and spirituality in a new context in the West.

Migration, diaspora: people are moving around the world

Migration has been one of the central social phenomena in the history of human development from the past until now. Movements were and are prompted because of social, political or economic circumstances. One of the terms used in explaining this is diaspora, which itself refers to 'the situation of any group of people dispersed, whether forcibly or voluntarily, throughout the world'.[10]

Diaspora has been a feature highlighted in the Bible, for example the story of Joseph in Egypt, or even the story of the people of Israel who left that land to travel to the Promised Land. It represents a repeated phenomenon of movement and displacement of peoples throughout history. Movement of individuals, groups and peoples to other parts of the globe creates interactions that affect whole social and anthropological dimensions of human populations and their changing contexts. Martien A. Halvorson-Taylor says that 'living "in diaspora" may assume a certain accommodation to living away from the homeland – and a sense that it is possible to survive and even thrive in the adopted country'.[11]

Christianity as a social and cultural phenomenon has been a religious movement that has influenced millions by its beliefs. One of the reasons for its success is the Christian calling to share the gospel and evangelise the entire globe. Generally, Christians have been mobile, pursuing their own interests, such as work availability, family matters, economic reasons, environmental problems, studies, etc. They take their spirituality with them wherever they are and attempt to share it with others.

In the last decades, the ongoing effects of globalisation have facilitated migration by individuals and groups moving to other regions in response to some of its demands, such as business interests, moving technological experts from one place to another, global trade, studies and research abroad. It is generally the case that the actual migration has been motivated by a search for work. However, this generalisation is an oversimplification. The patterns of migration are multifaceted and vary according to factors that stimulate or force people to travel around the world. They include labour, economics, war, family, and so on.[12]

Another factor that is crucial to emphasise is that after the First and Second World Wars there were a great many people moving to Europe to work by invitation of governments, to assist the European people in rebuilding the infrastructure and fabric of countries devastated by war. The UK especially benefited from migrant workers from many parts of the world.

The Health Protection Agency produced a report in 2006 describing the main flows of immigration to the UK in its recent history, showing an increased immigration flow to the UK bringing hundreds of thousands of people from different parts of the world.[13]

The immigration flows have brought a lot of problematic social issues, especially related to varied religious groups such as Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus. Considering just the Christians, some of them integrated into mainstream denominations relatively well. Hugh Osgood says that because most immigrants were engaged with a church in their home nations, their assimilation within Britain's historic denominations such as Roman Catholic, Anglican, Methodist and Baptist Churches was not as problematic as people were familiar with most of the styles of worship.[14]

The result of the interaction of immigrants is immediately apparent within this country through their languages, cultures, religions and histories, in their contribution to local churches and communities all over the country. This interaction confirms what Jenkins highlights, that 'about half of London's people are now non-White, and by the end of the twenty-first century, Whites will form a minority within Great Britain as a whole. The empires have struck back.'[15]

Looking at Methodism's perspective, the report to the Conference in 2014 highlights that 'Methodist churches have meaningful links with churches from 60 countries abroad, as well as noting worship and fellowship events held in

over 40 languages other than English'.[16] London District contains a very diverse sample of mixed congregations or even black congregations hosting a variety of different ethnic groups in its congregations all over the area.

An example is Forest Methodist circuit in North East London, where there are six ministers serving and each of them is from a different part of the globe (Brazil, Congo, Gambia, Korea, South Africa and Britain). Even the British minister is married to a Chinese husband. The congregations are half majority black and half majority white. Some of the churches include people from more than 15 nationalities and a variety of dialects. The diversity creates a rich identity for most of the churches in the London District and highlights the impact of reverse mission as many ministers have a non-British background.

Migrant Christians and integration with the Western Church

The discussion concerning immigration in Europe throughout the last several decades, particularly in the UK, has encouraged us to reflect on the possible benefits that this movement has offered to churches, as I mentioned before, based on the Methodist Church experience. Hun Kim indicates several reasons to explain why migrants can contribute to the mission of this land.

First, he mentions that the new Christian immigrants and their descendants come from a centre of vibrant Christian growth and embody a brand of Christianity that is strongly evangelistic or conversionist.[17] Also, Jenkins highlights that 'if there is a single key area of faith and practice that divides Northern and Southern Christians, it is this matter of spiritual forces and their effects on the everyday human world'.[18]

It is clear that mixed or ethnic churches are the ones where there is growth, especially in the Methodist context. Their vibrancy and the family practice of all being in church contributes towards a church style and standard that attracts people with similar needs. Their practice of faith is more alive and their intensity of believing allows them to ask God directly for their needs. To some extent, this religious experience is in opposition to the beliefs of some Western churches. Western traditional churches base their theology and practice more on their understanding of Christianity or on their traditions. It is more liberal, pragmatic and liturgical.

The second aspect Hun Kim mentions is that 'the new immigrant congregations are more attuned to religious plurality than their Western counterparts'. However, it is arguable that not all migrants are attuned to such pluralism. Perhaps their own context, with greater cultural and social pluralities, provides more openness in relating to others with different cultural elements. When such individuals interact within a different context, and there is a sense of fear and uncertainty, generally they demonstrate some flexibility in surviving in the new environment.

However, the process of contextualisation is not easy and it is necessary for any person to find points of familiar contact within the new context, and also to be able to remove things from their own context that might impede communication in order to gain a hearing for the gospel.[19] Perhaps the possibility for openness to a better communication with other people from different backgrounds enriches and enables some of the churches to experience an international expression of Christianity in the UK and other parts of Europe. For instance, some churches in London are experiencing very multi-ethnic congregations, having worshippers from many different cultural backgrounds. Some of the black churches are full of people from different countries, and so their skin colour doesn't place them in the same category. They might be Caribbean or African or Latin American. Christianity has united them in the same place for their worship, fellowship and mission.

Third, Hun Kim challenges us to comprehend the mission field in a wider perspective than the traditional one. For a long time the mission field was understood as being abroad, beyond the European frontiers. Reflecting on reverse mission, the movement to re-evangelise secularised societies requires a new interpretation of mission which involves a multi-dimensional matrix of interactions across geographical, generational, cultural and religious boundaries.

The *missio Dei* concept challenges us to see mission from the perspective of God, using all resources available to fulfil his will of bringing the values of his kingdom to all nations and peoples. There is no restriction that can block God's wish to reach out to his people anywhere. However, it is necessary to overcome the obstacles of traditional mindsets established by the culture of supremacy in the West. Roberta Guerrina indicates that one of the challenges for Europeans is to deal with their historical upbringing in their identifying of Europe as 'the centre of civilization'. Even more complicated is 'the establishment of Europe as Christendom, i.e. the land of Christianity, which also

provides an insight into the importance of Christian values in defining the idea of Europe and the legacy of European civilization'.[20]

One of the ways of achieving this purpose is to implement mission in partnership.[21] This partnership relies on our answer to God's calling to do his mission wherever we are. Hun Kim indicates that 'the reverse trend in missions offers the "old heartlands" of Christianity a model for renewal'.[22] However, mission is not done from a single, fixed perspective as the world is both local and global in any given context because of the movement of people in the communities. For instance, it is certain that some ethnic groups are reached when there are missionaries from their own culture, or even in some cases foreign missionaries, who have shared the experiences of a particular group.

Missional incarnation and context from a Methodist perspective

Reverse mission challenges the missionaries who work in Western fields to observe the context and learn from it to develop any missional work. Considering the integration and experience of many missionaries from the Global South, many scholars have taken into account the significance of this phenomenon in the last few decades.

Each context requires a specific incarnational mission according to the communities and groups involved. The number of overseas ministers who are leading congregations in Britain is increasing and their pastoral and mission ministries are both to British white groups or those composed of mixed ethnic groups.

Reverse mission in the Methodist Church

It is within the DNA of Methodism to advance the interests of sharing the gospel from a worldwide perspective. Before the Methodist movement started to organise itself, we can see people like John and Charles Wesley following the process of British colonisation, having their mission experience in Georgia, USA. The sense of responsibility to *share* holiness or the gospel with the whole world is summed up in a classic phrase of John Wesley's when he said, 'I look upon the whole World as my Parish.'

According to the World Methodist Council, the movement is in 77 countries and represents 80 million people. All the churches have a clear connection with

Wesleyan heritage and have to be open to mission in the world, as one of the classic ambitions and purposes of John Wesley was to 'spread scriptural holiness throughout the land'. This has been understood as part of Methodist identity and has been taken very seriously by all the Churches worldwide. The effect of Wesleyan mission theology is seen clearly with a contribution from Churches in the Southern Hemisphere sending missionaries to the Northern Hemisphere. The World Church in Britain Partnership (WCBP) programme has facilitated the process of bringing personnel from the South to serve as mission partners in the UK.

My research on the contribution of mission partners in the Methodist Church in Britain showed that there has been an incredible impact on the local churches involved, as they were able to interact and share new cultural aspects, bringing a new perspective and understanding of Christian faith and Methodism. The initiative has been decisive in the process of transforming British Methodism with an enlarged world-view of the Methodist Church globally.

Another aspect of reverse mission in British Methodism has been to receive feedback on the flame of the 'gospel from the South', which was once again kindled in the West where Christians have lost inspiration and enthusiasm. However, WCBP shared a valuable point: in their reviews with mission partners, they realised that they could share something with the Church having formerly received ministry from Western missionaries.

However, the interaction between The Methodist Church in Britain (MCB) and the mission partners revealed some difficulties. The idea of being exposed to a missional situation without exerting any personal influence is extremely difficult, and also the participation process will not happen if the individual remains aloof. Most mission partners have been very willing to interact and to understand their congregations' cultures and traditions. In this respect, the learning process of mission partners has created the possibility to abstract and select what would be more appropriate in facilitating their communication and missional work with the MCB.

In my own experience, I was allocated to a very traditional appointment in Gloucestershire. The churches (Tewkesbury and Apperley) are composed mainly of adults and elderly people. That church profile helped me to understand the culture, as many members were willing to support me throughout my time there, using their skills and experiences to facilitate the interaction and development of the partnership in ministry and mission. The openness

and willingness of a community that understood the challenge of mission partner incarnation and acculturation facilitated a 'successful' ministry in terms of learning and sharing, development and planning, integration and making new friends, and also in exploring new mission avenues and welcoming new people to the life of the church. There was a time that the church had more than 15 'foreigners' worshipping there, as we were able to welcome a few Brazilian, Italian and French people to study and work in the area.

Another example of mission incarnation was during the floods in 2007 when our community took responsibility for supporting some of those who were affected by the flooding. It was a holistic response when we were able to provide shelter, food, water, laundry, pastoral and spiritual support, holidays, etc. On that occasion, I was challenged by some British reserve, embarrassment, frustration and sense of shame. Perhaps my situation as a foreigner opened up connections. A lot of people felt relaxed enough to share some of their stories and experiences with me. It was at that point I felt I was being really useful, because the barriers of culture and communication collapsed, enabling us to share God's grace and compassion with people who themselves had been brought very low.

Reverse mission is not just about personnel, but the willingness of both sides, mission partners and local people, to make the connections positively and with respect for what God's mission requires in the given context.

Conclusion

Reverse mission is a phenomenon present in many European and British contexts and it is bringing a really important contribution not just to ethnic churches but also to many other churches that are taking seriously the mission work needed to meet the demands found in their communities.

The example of The Methodist Church in Britain shows us that reverse mission is not based on the enterprise of a Church that wants to expand its denomination in the West. The mission partners have been devoted people who wanted to share their experiences with their 'Mother Church'. It is true that their intention was very much based on the flame of sharing the gospel. However, the challenge of dealing with a different culture highlights that reverse mission is more than willingness to serve abroad or be connected with ethnic groups living away from home. It is a process of acceptance of a new

context, culture, language and social environment, which takes those who are involved within the enterprise to a new form of mission.

The effectiveness of reverse mission is an ongoing learning process of being involved in God's mission to proclaim his kingdom in a multicultural context like Britain. The MCB is just a small example of involvement with personnel from the Southern Hemisphere. There is a variety of other mission and church groups where they are experiencing the same.

Undoubtedly, the mission movement in the twenty-first century has a strong link with what is happening in the global world. Reverse mission enriches faith communities and brings a wide and deep perspective on what Christianity is, both locally and globally.

Notes

1. Nazir-Ali 1990, p. 209.
2. Walls 1996; Kahl 2002, p. 330; Jenkins 2002, p. 2.
3. Hun Kim 2011, p. 63.
4. Spencer 2008, p. 109.
5. Adogame 2008, p. 1.
6. Nazir-Ali 1990, p. 209.
7. Adogame 2008, p. 1.
8. Jenkins 2002, p. 99.
9. Goodhew 2012, p. 107.
10. Jary and Jary 1991, p. 166.
11. Halvorson-Taylor 2015.
12. Held et al. 1999, p. 284.
13. Health Protection Agency 2006, p. 115.
14. Goodhew 2012, p. 109.
15. Jenkins 2002, p. 97.
16. *Methodism in Numbers* 2014.
17. Hun Kim 2011, p. 64.
18. Jenkins 2002, p. 123.
19. Guthrie 2000, p. 127.
20. Guerrina 2002, pp. 1, 13.
21. Bosch 1991, p. 370.
22. Hun Kim 2011, p. 64.

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