

The Methodist Church in Britain and the London based Anglican Mission Agency USPG (United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel) hold in common an ecumenical commitment to share in God's mission with one another and in companionship with Anglican, Methodist and United Churches worldwide. One tangible outcome of this global sharing in mission is that they frequently facilitate personnel to cross cultures for short periods and experience life and faith in a very different part of the wider world church. Destinations and placements are mutually agreed, with receiving churches and projects encouraged to offer participants a 'total immersion' model of entry into and experience of a new region, culture and church rather than a 'spectator' model which might demand no more than that of any benevolent Christian tourist peering through a strategically positioned window on the wider world church, from a safe distance. The present pieces of work which attempt to offer this kind of engagement are the Experience Exchange Programme (joint), Formation in World Mission (Methodist) and Expanding Horizons (USPG), though ecumenical overlap and interchange are present in all three.

The Experience Exchange Programme (EEP) in its literature invites potential participants to

1. *Learn* from the experience of living alongside Christians in a community from another culture.
2. *Share in the life* and mission of a local church and, in so doing, develop personal and spiritual gifts.
3. *Share sensitively* your own faith and gifts in offering service to that community.
4. *Deepen your understanding* of issues of global development and justice in relation to your faith.
5. *Raise awareness* among members of the churches in Britain and Ireland about the practical and spiritual realities of the lives of people in other parts of the world.¹

In the light of such an invitation, which anticipates some impressive outcomes not least in 4 and 5; to what extent is it possible to measure the impact and 'success' of an Experience Exchange Programme or similar plunge experience programme on both the participant and receiver? A

¹ http://www.uspg.org.uk/serve/serve_eep.php

research project committed to tackling this question is timely for USPG and the Methodist Church. Hundreds of people have now experienced other cultures and churches through these organised programmes. What are the results, effects and benefits for the whole mission of God, and are they even measurable intelligently? At the same time, many other Anglicans and Methodists in Britain have crisscrossed the globe to 'plunge into' other cultures and churches for a short time without a thought of seeking the help (or hindrance?) of USPG and the Methodist Church to facilitate this. They have simply gone; somehow motivated by a sense of mission, using local contacts and arrangements, with minimal or no preparation, and with outcomes 1 to 5 possibly, but not necessarily, in mind. They may well have journeyed with a set of quite different 'immersion' aims and outcomes uppermost; to roll up their sleeves and finish building that classroom block at the rural African school for which they have been fundraising. Or, to renew friendship in the name of mission with Revd N and his family, (whom they grew to know and love when he was a theological student in England), bearing books for his library, a gleaming new chalice and paten for his sacristy and copies of 'Common Worship' for his congregation. Surely these are valuable immersion experiences too. What is the difference? And does the difference matter?

In his book *Serving with eyes wide open; doing short-term missions with cultural intelligence*, David Livermore gathers an impressive range of material from both those who travel short term in the name of God's mission and the people and communities who find themselves on the receiving end. He says,

I call us to question our assumptions, to hear the voices of non-Westerners who have received our mission trips, our consulting, and our training modules. I want us to be open to the idea that our overall perspective might need altering. (Livermore 2006: 13)

An aspect of that overall perspective that cries out for immediate alteration is surely the choice of language here. Receivers of mission visits are described by the author as 'non-Westerners.' Cultural

assumption and linguistic expression are inextricably bound together and hugely powerful. From the outset we are presented with a perspective that implies that 'Western' (not even Northern, perhaps?) is the normative, linguistic construct which then permits the other; the 'non' person, to be defined in relation to it. Nowhere in the book are North Americans defined as non-Southerners! Livermore's book is helpful, revealing and challenging in many ways and this comment is not intended to write it off wholesale. However, even in the early choice of language, it suggests where the balance of power is held in his research, and which will be the primary lens through which we view his material.

Suitably cautioned, it is not the intention of this paper to offer a fully worked out research proposal as yet. USPG and the Methodist Church are not quite at that stage and further consultation is currently in progress. It is the intention of this paper however to share three critical concerns that originally ignited, are already driving and will continue to fuel this piece of research, and to offer some theological and missiological perspectives on those concerns. They are (1) the concern for movement that benefits holistic mission, (2) the concern for authentic relationships in mission, (3) the concern for ecumenical generosity in mission. The research will ask; do short term programmes of immersion, experience and exposure take seriously these concerns and address them for both participant and partner?

Movement that benefits holistic mission

D. Preman Niles, reflecting on 'journey' in Numbers 11, speaks of the temptation of Israel to settle down at a convenient spot and refuse to move, at which point the Spirit of disruption may be required. Complacency, he argues, is the enemy of mission (2005, Niles: 43). This is hardly the problem for the mission minded with time on their hands in Britain in 2007. More people than ever are applying for short term opportunities in the wider world church, but many with remarkably traditional motivations; to do some 'good,' to 'get out of my comfort zone,' and to 'put something back into the

world' in gratitude and recompense for the blessings they have already enjoyed.² Longevity and improved physical health mean that 'sixty is the new forty and seventy the new fifty.' Considerable proportions of that age group are happy to travel and be 'disrupted;' longing to use their experience and skills to 'make a difference' somewhere, before it is too late. In preparation and training for short term experience programmes, USPG and the Methodist Church insist that participants examine in depth such needs and motivations and invite volunteers to engage with an (often very new for them) holistic model of mission in which the primary activity is God's alone; an activity intended to redeem and reconcile the whole world, and in which we find our most appropriate place by firstly listening, learning and receiving. A model, furthermore, which might even suggest that one person's passion, and economic freedom to be able to move in mission may leave behind not only an unwelcome carbon footprint, but some marks of mission which are dated, dubious and driven by insularity and individualism. The proposed research would therefore aim to survey participants who have in recent years taken part in USPG and Methodist Church short term mission programmes and expressed some of these desires and motivations. It would also survey receiving churches and placements to assess whether this kind of movement in mission has helped or hindered the holistic mission of the local church or project which received them. In other words, has the movement of those from the North truly been embarked upon, (my emphases)

*...with the intention of transforming **human life in all its dimensions**, according to God's purpose and of enabling human beings to enjoy the abundant life that God wants to give to them and that Jesus Christ came to share with them. The mission of the church is multifaceted because it depends on the mission of God, which includes **the whole of creation and the totality of human life.**³*

² Sentiments expressed by participants in Experience Exchange Programme training at the Selly Oak Centre for Mission Studies, Queen's Foundation, Birmingham UK, 6-13 January 2007

³ Holistic Mission: Occasional Paper No. 33 by the Issue Group on this topic at the 2004 Forum for World Evangelization hosted by the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization in Pattaya, Thailand, September 29 to October 5, 2004

Authentic relationships in mission

In making an assessment of the contribution of USPG and the Methodist Church's short term programmes to holistic mission, considerable attention will be paid to how they have affected the quality of relationships church to church; both structurally and between individuals. Mission focussed, relational working is fundamental to both partners. The Methodist Church in Britain and Ireland has a Connexion of 6150 local churches, and on their behalf, the World Church Office is tasked to build up relationships for mutual encouragement with the 57 separate national churches that they are in partnership with across the world. USPG serves not a Connexion, but the worldwide Anglican Communion 'church to church' with the aim of enabling people to grow spiritually, to thrive physically and to have a voice in an unjust world. As an Anglican mission agency, it does this alongside churches and communities around the world, providing the resources - people, money and ideas - that they define as necessary to meet local needs. Predominantly this work involves pastoral care, social action, education and supporting training programmes, in the name of God's mission. Thus a USPG partner from South India is able to write;

Mission is bringing about holistic development in people's lives. It is releasing the people from physical, economical, spiritual, educational and social poverty. It is identifying the needs of the people and helping them to help themselves. USPG has helped uphold our Lord's mission in this part of the world through prayers and the sharing of resources.

Sister Kasthuri Manickam, Nagalapuram Training Centre, Tamil Nadu, India⁴

Sister Kasthuri, writing in USPG's 2004 handbook, is someone whose experience of cross-cultural mission has fed her own understanding of authentic relationships in mission. Having herself completed mission studies in Birmingham, England and returned to Tamil Nadu, Sister Kasthuri has since facilitated the receiving of short term EEP volunteers who plunge into the life of Nagalapuram Training Centre. She has become a key player in setting up experiences which exploit an immersion

⁴ http://www.uspg.org.uk/our_work/g_lib/yrbk05.pdf

pedagogy to the full because she has experienced personally what it means to plunge into the English higher education system, the Church of England, the cultural assumptions and sensibilities of the English, and even the Winter snow. Those who arrive to share in God's mission in her place will find she knows, to some extent, their place and their context, and that she understands much about the discomfort, disorientation and cost of immersion into the unfamiliar. Reciprocal experience of our contexts for mission then becomes a critical tool in relearning and reassessing what authentic relationships in mission might and might not be about. Why, for example, the building of a classroom by overseas volunteer labour, however well intentioned, may not in reality further and enhance holistic mission, may undermine the structural 'church to church' relationship where priorities for funding and projects have already been agonised over and mutually agreed, and may not even succeed in building authentic relationships in the church locally, where casual labourers queue each day desperate for work and wages, and watch a potential source of income disappear before their eyes through a British congregation's enthusiasm for mission in action. Livermore's work has plenty of similar North American examples. And yet our research project will be compelled to wrestle also with the incarnational imperative to affirm and encourage earthed, human, interpersonal relationships in mission, to avoid at all costs what Rowan Williams - writing on Christian society with reference to William Tyndale - identifies as

...the terrible and false universalism of global culture and atomised humanitarianism, our peculiarities smoothed out by the promises of a universal, distributive justice...(2004, Williams: 23)

Ecumenical generosity in mission

USPG and the Methodist Church believe that authentic relationships in mission will be of their very nature, open, generous and accommodating of the other. According to Sri Lankan theologian Marlene Perera, such relationships will always operate out of a motivation of love rather than by command and constantly call for a radical change in our way of being; a Trinitarian way - from one of

domination to one of interconnectedness, mutuality and cooperation, caring for and building up one another. Relationship missiology, suggests Mary Schaller Blaufuss, is exemplified in the communion of love which is the Trinity. (2002, Pachuau: 184). In this spirit, USPG and the Methodist Church have been in an ecumenical, covenant relationship since 1996, funding and facilitating together a range of missiological work, most recently the forming of the Selly Oak Centre for Mission Studies at the Queen's Foundation for Ecumenical Theological Education in Birmingham, England. They sometimes point out (with due humility!) that this long preceded the official Church of England-Methodist Covenant signed on 1 November 2003. The research question this raises for a church and a mission society committed ecumenically to short term mission exposure is, 'How far do such people and programmes actively promote and encourage ecumenical generosity in mission in the places to which they go?' Already, the programmes mentioned in this paper operate inter-denominationally out of the British context. Experience Exchange volunteers, for example, may not necessarily come from Anglican or Methodist backgrounds themselves. They may enter into the experience through the motivation of Christian discipleship rather than denominationalism, though for some, an Anglican or Methodist identity will be important. Receiving churches and projects may, on the other hand, have a very powerful denominational identity and an agenda largely concerned with denominational expansion. A recent EEP volunteer in Zambia, Claire Price commented;

One thing that has really challenged me has been people's attitudes to God. Everyone here goes to church. The question people ask of each other is not whether they go to church, but which church they go to. (2006, USPG/Methodist Church: 12)

Is there an Anglican 'way,' a Methodist 'way' which enables volunteers to immerse themselves in the riches of denominational tradition but remain committed to modelling a way of being Christian which is embracing of all? Within the worldwide Anglican Communion and Methodist Connexion, there are sharp differences and divisions; theological, liturgical, ethical, and volunteers may well find themselves uncomfortably at the sharp end of these. This research will attempt to discover, from gathered evidence, whether those engaged in short term immersion programmes in the wider world

church have been able in any way to model or express an ecumenical generosity, even through their very, incarnational, presence, that has been illuminating for others. That has demonstrated a different way.

And maybe we will discover that is not impossible. Emmaus theology, after all, reminds us of meaning, revelation and renewed hope being found in both journey and destination; but most wonderfully through Christ, in the stranger's guise.

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