

Gagged

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Missionaries used to love to tell stories that illustrate the contexts in which they are working. Some stories would be examples of the Christian faithfulness of people in the communities they were reaching. Sometimes the stories would illustrate how difficult life is in the area where the missionary is working. Sometimes the stories would incredulously describe obscure primitive customs for people back at home to be amazed at.

The world has changed. Inter-continental communication has improved vastly in the last few decades. Even in my early days in Africa (from 1988) communication with home was over a 4-week cycle through handwritten letters that took 2 weeks to get to the UK, then 2 weeks for the response to come back. Nowadays phones in our pockets give us instant and often cheap two-way conversations globally.

In parallel with the above change, Anglophone Africa has experienced a geometrical increase in the spread of English. Whereas decades ago English knowledge might have been confined to the educated few, the expansion of the education system at primary, secondary and tertiary levels is resulting in knowledge of English being much more widespread.

The above described expansion in communication capability and knowledge of English is, I suggest, having a profound impact on missionaries' reporting of their contexts and their ministries. There are at least four areas in which accurate 'reporting' about the context of field ministry has become much more difficult and restricted:

First, there are the stories about individuals. These could be 'hero accounts' of people living inspiring Christian lives, or descriptions of calamities people are facing. In the past a missionary's supporters may have been encouraged to generosity by such accounts. But nowadays, when missionary accounts are on the web and available to all on the internet, the person being reported could identify him or herself, then could contact the missionary supporters and others, and use the credibility acquired as a result of the missionary's report to raise their own funds. "What is the problem with that" my reader may be thinking? Various questions arise as a result – especially the likelihood that such reporting about an individual can be to give them a gold-mine should they communicate directly with the missionary's supporters. One can add that should this person begin to communicate with donors, one outcome may be a raft of problems in mis-communication that the missionary may later be called on to solve. Giving out gold-mines may be OK – but it is a lot of power in the hands of the missionary to decide just who the wealthy hero will be. Instead, to avoid this, missionaries must these days report less about individuals.

Second, in the past, missionaries may have explained how peoples' day to day lives in the places they were working were different from those in their home countries. They might have done this for various reasons; such as to help folks 'back home' to reflect on their own lives, or to encourage them to pray for their missionary. These days though, with the existence of the internet and numerous other efficient communication media, people on the field can get to know what is being reported. They may be upset if they are reported as being different from Westerners, if in their own view they are educated and 'westernised'. In addition to being upset, they may demand compensation. That is, if the missionary is going to explain how hard life is for people 'out there' then the people themselves would also like to be benefitting from the

‘hardship’ funds that come to the missionary. They may not be happy for missionaries to be explaining how hard their lives are so as to benefit personally, without the nationals sharing in the perceived profit arising from such reporting.

Third, one impact of globalisation is an ongoing rise in primary and secondary as well as more advanced levels of education. As a result of such education, and especially because it is in English and increasingly tied in with the globalised world that is dominated by certain Western nations, discourses engaged in diverse parts of the world are becoming increasingly harmonised. The media is especially instrumental in this. The formal media in much of Anglophone Africa (and presumably the same applies to the media in other parts of the continent and the world) reports on its own people in much the same way as does the Western media on Western people. The above effects, and others, have resulted in a tendency to conceal difference. Things happening outside of the West are reported as if they are happening in the West. A new missionary then is under pressure to do the same. That is; not to report on cultural *differences*.

Fourth, is the fact that some of the things mentioned above conceal many ‘cultural features’ of peoples’ lives to missionaries, so that even a missionary living on the field, may not quickly become aware of what is going on in a community around him or her. There need be no reluctance to reporting ‘back home’ on what is happening on the field, if the missionary him or herself has already been blinded to what is going on around them by some or all of the above mentioned mechanisms.

In conclusion we can suggest that globalisation is gagging and blinding missionaries on the ground. Either they are less able to report that which goes on around them or, and increasingly, they may not even be aware of it. This has many implications for the work of the Gospel, and for the work of development and compassionate ministries. In short – mission work and development work are these days increasingly being carried out in ignorance of rather than with respect to local realities. Instead of compensating for and fitting to local contexts, it is applied like a broad brush in the same way all over the world. This practice, of working blind to local conditions, has various serious largely negative consequences.

An important means of getting around the above obscuring of knowledge that I would like to propose, is that some missionaries engage with people using local languages and resources. A missionary funding their own activity in poor parts of the world almost invariably accentuates efforts by local people at presenting a case that demonstrates the need for more money regardless of the actual complexities of their needs. The use of international languages like English will automatically render much that is going on invisible and prevent a missionary from attending to the nature of local discourse in indigenous languages. Use of local languages and resources will enable a missionary to engage with the actual context on the ground. Meanwhile supporters and others interested in the progress of mission work probably simply need to realise that it is in today’s age becoming increasingly difficult from a distance to ascertain the truth of what is going on in another distant part of the world, for reasons given above and others in addition. This has many implications for ways in which we relate inter-culturally.