

Article of the Month – June 2008

Redemptive Gifts of the Church in the Non-Western World

By Steef van 't Slot (Ph.D.)



Two months ago I stated that “The Church in the Developing World is huge in numbers and rich in redemptive gifts”, and promised to elaborate on that statement. So, here we go. If, for the sake of convenience, we stick to Patrick Johnstone’s stats of seven years ago¹ we see that the Church in Latin America & The Caribbean, Asia and Africa combined number about 1,174 million (all Christians) and 304 million of those are Evangelicals. If only every 1,000 Evangelicals would send and support just one missionary, as I proposed in the same article, the Church in that part of the world alone could send over 300,000 missionaries. At present the real number is about 92,000 (excluding the Pacific Islands) and the total number of missionaries is just over 200,000. This last number includes the entire western world².

It would be simple with such good material as Johnstone’s at hand, to toy around with missionary statistics for the remainder of this article, but then we could easily miss the point I’m trying to make. The non-Western Church not only has important redemptive gifts, but possesses these abundantly. Paradoxically, some of those have their origin in the human suffering we can often acquaint ourselves with from media reports, if not from first-hand experience. Interestingly, a parallel can be discovered between these redemptive gifts and the average ‘unreached-people-profile’ – if such a thing exists at all – that we find when we look at many of the people groups where the Gospel is not yet available.

An important issue is, that we realize that unreached people groups are in that state for five good reasons. *Firstly*, there is the physical aspect (remoteness, lack of roads and unavailable means of transport). *Secondly*, we see the issues of culture (isolated from other cultures, and relatively closed communities). In the *third* place we face different social strata (higher/lower status: economic positions and education). *Then*, generational components play a role (e.g. how will non-Christian youth and children find Christ when most Christians are found in older age groups?) *Finally*, there are the religious reasons: a non-Christian people group may remain so because the minority Christian group is fearful to reach out, or because a nominal majority Christian group is slow to reach out.

Even if such a thing as an ‘average unreached people-profile’ does not exist, there are still a number of commonalities that are at least interesting to look at. Seven of those draw our attention. The *first* is the tribal, rural background (as contrasting to a national, urban background) that many share; *next* there is the oral tradition (as in contrast to literacy); *thirdly*, unemployment and the resulting poverty seem to have been the rule, rather than the exception. As *fourth* aspect I would like to mention the frequent occurrence of natural

¹ Johnstone, 2001:19,29,39

² Ibid, p. 21,34,41,747

disasters, such as drought, famines, earthquakes, floods and mud-slides. *Then* there is the problem of physical disease and the absence of adequate medical care. *Sixthly*, there is a lot of war-related pain, like fleeing, fear, material loss, emotional trauma, physical disablement, rape and the death of loved ones. *Finally*, they share a traditional ethnic religious belief system, where demonic bondage and the fear of evil spirits dominate entire societies.

When we then look at the background of many believers that find their spiritual home in the Church of the non-Western world, we see that many of them come from a similar and comparable origin. When these Christians have discovered how Christ has become their source of salvation, relief and comfort *in the midst* of such suffering, it becomes obvious that they qualify much better to reach out to those remaining unreached and least-reached people-groups than their western brethren are. The latter come from an almost diametrically opposed direction, with regard to their cultural background, which often includes the lack of toughness, required to reach those that are – in western eyes – hard to touch.

Yet, our non-western brothers and sisters have many arguments why *not* to engage in world missions, some of which are founded on a perception of inferiority and others on false comparisons with the means of western Christians. We often hear: “we were not trained ... therefore we are unemployed ... and have no income ... and are poor ... and have no food ... and cannot afford medical care ... nor schooling for our children”. And although there is truth in these arguments, they may never remain the reason why world missions should be left in the hands of their western siblings. Fortunately the taskforce of non-western missionaries grows rapidly – but just not rapid enough.

Now is the time to shake off the chronicle of perpetual doom and to do away with the hurts of slavery & colonial oppression, mismanagement & war, political turmoil & coups, corruption & economic regression and fight against the return of previously eradicated sicknesses. There is a better, more positive and certainly more mature response. Non-western Christians may ask themselves: Can we turn weaknesses into strengths? Suffering into redemptive gifts? Lethargy and self-pity into faith? Can we believe the Word of God in spite of prevailing circumstances? Can we choose to become givers rather than receivers? It has been said that ‘a beggar never gives, but a giver never begs’. Would that not be a good new paradigm to live from?

Let’s face the conclusion of it all: *Nobody is more suitable to reach the remaining unreached people groups, than non-Western Christians are.* Although there are big differences among non-Western Christians, they have much in common too. And yes, there are tremendous needs on the continents of the southern hemisphere, but there is a huge potential of manpower, enthusiasm and faith too. World missions is NOT ‘the white man’s job’, ‘the hobby of the few’ or ‘the task of the rich’. The Great Commission has been given to ALL Christ’s disciples, never mind their race of color.

Christ commissioned the *whole* Church to take the *whole* Gospel to the *whole* World to *every* person – to use another quote. Are you not called to be a missionary yourself? Then what can *you* do for world missions? You can pray, you can give and you can go. Why not pray once a day, give once a month and go once a year?