Labouring Together, Listening Together?

Improving the effectiveness of short-term mission in Moldova by understanding church leaders’ experiences of working with foreign short-term missionaries

Author: Christopher Ducker, Graduate of Redcliffe College on the MA in Global Issues in Contemporary Mission programme and missionary in Moldova. This paper is an abridged version of Chris’s dissertation, the full version of which can be accessed through his website.

‘Virtually all of the published research related to short-term missions focuses on the perspectives of the short-term missioners themselves… with very little research exploring the experiences and perspectives of those in the receiving communities.’

Priest (2007, pp179-180)

Introduction

As a Christian missionary working in Moldova since 2007, this author has hosted many short-term missions teams. Consulting the missiological literature, it became clear that short-term mission, like Moldova itself, has been neglected by missiologists; and that, just as Moldova is a young country barely out of its teenage years, this is a young discipline also at a significant juncture. The vast majority of literature concerning short-term mission has been written from the perspective of senders/goers whilst the opinions of recipient cultures and host churches have seldom been heard or sought.

This troubling observation led this author to devise a “listening exercise,” based on interviews with 22 Moldovan church leaders experienced in working with foreigners on short-term mission. Whilst this research shows the significance of partnership and cultural sensitivity, good communication in the form of feedback is ultimately regarded as the most important factor, since through this other issues can be addressed.

The Short-Term Missions Movement

Mission historians have tended to describe the short-term missions movement as a post-war phenomenon, with the 1960s in particular seeing the formation of mission organizations with a short-term emphasis, e.g. YWAM and Operation Mobilisation (Backholer, 2010, p11). By the 1980s, the number of people involved in short-term missionary service was increasing sharply, such that Reapsome (1982, p112) could already refer to an “explosion” of volunteers. Made possible by cheaper international travel and drawing on greater global awareness, the movement gained momentum, seeing more church groups going overseas, especially from the United States to Latin America. This trend, more recently involving millions of Christians each year, was both a product and a cause of globalization. It was also connected to a broader understanding of mission beyond the traditional focus on evangelism, suggesting that short-term mission is indeed part of a new missional paradigm.

For the purposes of this paper, short-term mission is understood as the temporary going out of Christians into cross-cultural situations, to participate in kingdom-building activities, including but not exclusively evangelism, for a period of up to one year. They go from one
part of God’s church (their local church, or a mission agency) and in His name, preferably to work in partnership with national Christians.

Some 50 years after the modern STM movement started, there remains fierce debate about whether or not STM is a force for good. Winter repeatedly criticised the ‘re-amateurization’ (1996) of short-term missions, claiming it was not actually ‘missionary activity [but rather]… a very high-quality educational activity’ (2004b, p13) and that the quality of such missionaries was ‘mainly inadequate’ (2004a, p4). More recently, Ver Beek (2005, 2006, 2007) has written influential papers that, though not against short-term mission per se, have been critical of their lack of long-term impact.

In response, Priest has argued that ‘STM trips… have a strategic role to play’ (Priest and Priest, 2008, p71). Poston (2008, p9) has tried to shift the focus away from the duration of a mission trip, towards their actual function, adding that instead of ‘continuing to castigate today’s young people for their lack of long-term commitment, we should instead capitalize on their short-term bursts of energy’. Greene (2003, pp14-15) goes as far as listing 21 advantages of short-term mission – though most of these benefits are accrued by goers rather than hosts.

Hosts – The Missing STM Perspective

The growing missiological literature concerning short-term mission has approached its subject from several different angles, and there has been considerable research into the impact such trips have on “goers”. There is a danger that STM trips prioritize their experiences and spiritual journeys – and that whilst we should not be surprised to find God working in the lives of His people through such experiences, it is a different thing altogether for mission trips to have such spiritual development as their primary goal, rather than a missional or kingdom-building focus.

In a discussion with Priest, Ver Beek observed that ‘out of the 40-some studies that we found published before 2004, only one interviewed “receivers” of STM’ (2005). Little has changed since their discussion. From a methodological perspective, one can understand that it is easier for a researcher to interview a class of American students who have been on a summer missions trip than to interview a host church or a group of national leaders. But this alone cannot fully account for the fact that so little research has been done into the experiences of host churches and communities.

Over a decade ago, Krabill (1998, p130) called for greater research into those on the receiving end of mission trips – a call that has since been echoed by Priest (2006, p429), Thomas (2010, p9) and others – yet this remains almost completely untouched territory. It is hoped that this research paper can illustrate the value of such research, and provide suggestions for further research in this area.

The Moldovan Context

Moldova is an Eastern European country, formed in 1991 after the break-up of the Soviet Union. Moldova was historically part of Romania, reflected by the facts that 76% of its people are ethnic Romanians and the official language is Romanian. As King observes, since independence ‘nation-building and… national identity of the Moldovans have remained topics at the center of political life’ (1999, p225).

Moldova is Europe’s poorest country, with average incomes at 6% of the USA. According to the latest Human Development Report (UNDP, 2011, p126), Moldova has the lowest Human Development Index of any European country, and a lower ranking than, for example, Bolivia, Gabon and Mongolia. As such, missionaries in Moldova have focused not only on evangelism but also on ministries amongst the poor and marginalised.
Moldova is generally an Orthodox country, with 3.44 million Orthodox compared to 138,000 Protestants and independents (Johnson and Ross, 2009, p337). Pickel (2008, p198) puts church attendance throughout Moldova at 11% in 1999/2000. In the absence of any official figures, it is difficult to estimate the number of Christian short-term volunteers coming to Moldova. Discussions with various Christian leaders enable us to tentatively suggest that some 1200-1500 short-term missionaries come annually, participating in perhaps 150-200 mission trips.

Research Findings

Listed below are the key findings of the 22 in-depth interviews this author conducted in 2012:

- Research participants had hosted an average of 17.5 STM teams. Their collective experience was 385 STM trips.
- STM volunteers came from the USA and the UK and, to a lesser extent, Romania, Germany and the Netherlands.
- Their principle activities were evangelistic events and children’s camps, followed by construction projects and practical help.
- Planning was more likely to be carried out by foreigners than by Moldovans, though often it was done jointly.
- Where hosts and visitors had engaged in feedback, it had led to change 64% of the time.
- Hosts see the main benefits of STM as: locals being attracted by foreigners and more likely to listen to them; financial support; and teams inspiring local churches.
- Hosts tend to credit STM teams with having clear aims and objectives: 73% said that this was the case.
- 59% of Moldovan hosts thought that STM teams were largely effective. Other respondents had mixed comments and one person regretted that ‘A few times they were useless.’
- 68% of hosts thoughts that STM fitted very well with their church’s vision.
- 36% of Moldovan hosts thought there were significant differences between their beliefs and volunteers’, e.g. relating to baptism in the Holy Spirit; spiritual gifts; working with other denominations; and the role of women in the church.
- Moldovan church leaders politely protested that short-term missionaries know either nothing (27%) or very little (41%) about Moldova before coming.
- But visiting teams did make some effort to learn about, and adapt to, Moldovan culture during their stay: “definitely” (18%); “to a large extent” (50%); and “to some extent” (27%).
- STM teams did not always respect Moldovan customs and traditions. Examples of disrespect included not being dressed suitably in church; smoking; consuming alcohol; complaining about gender roles.
- A large majority of STM hosts claimed they would say if they had been offended by a STM team. But whilst many respondents said they would share when teams had been offensive, they felt that other Moldovans would be reticent.
- 86% of hosts said they had an established way of sharing and giving feedback. The most popular form of sharing and evaluating was the daily team meeting, followed by just leaders meeting together or simply ad hoc chats.
• 32% of hosts said that STM teams always listened to them and a further 50% said they were usually listened to.

• Moldovan hosts described STM teams positively as: desiring to serve; dedicated; sacrificial; friendly; and willing.

• They described teams negatively as: too liberal; not wanting to see things differently; disrespectful of local leaders; and coming merely for adventure.

• The advice most frequently given to STM teams was to learn about Moldovan culture before arriving (both church culture and general culture). Other advice was to accept the living conditions uncomplainingly – whether food, toilets or accommodation.

• Further pieces of advice are true of STM in general: be flexible; build long-term partnerships; don’t make promises you won’t keep; and be patient with co-workers. Those who are not spiritually mature should not pretend they are just because they come from a more “developed” country.

These results provide an important contribution to the missiological literature by demonstrating host perspectives on different aspects of STM. Amongst the positive comments and heartfelt appreciation were repeated concerns about behaviour, communication, spiritual immaturity and unpreparedness.

Appraising the Effectiveness of STM

To assess the effectiveness of short-term mission, we need to reflect on what are we measuring – the impact of what on whom? The following areas have been reviewed to see whether STM has had a positive impact: STMers’ charitable; number of STMers training as long-term missionaries; better interethnic relationships; greater levels of “social trust”; “spiritual impact” on STMers; STMers’ “level of satisfaction”; interest in missions; “increased religious participation”; “solidified religious belief”; and “youth civic action” (Priest et al, 2006; Ver Beek, 2006; Trinitapoli and Vaisey, 2009; Beyerlein et al, 2011).

Whilst these impacts are all desirable, it is troubling that it is increasingly common to measure the effectiveness of short-term mission trips according to their impact on goers or the sending community, rather than on the host community. There is a danger that STM is becoming more about discipling young Westerners and less about serving other Christians and working with them in mission. Local churches are in many ways best-placed to decide the effectiveness of STM because they have the best understanding of local reaction to it. This is especially true when we remember that some of the fruits (or problems!) of short-term mission may only be revealed in the long-term, after STM teams have returned home.

Improving STM Effectiveness in Moldova

Based on the in-depth interviews and a seminar with a further 14 Moldovan STM hosts, this author suggests that the following three areas are crucial to improving the effectiveness of short-term mission in Moldova: (1) Partnership, (2) Cultural sensitivity, and (3) Feedback.

Partnership

In some parts of the world, there seems to be a pattern of short-term mission where change is the norm: either a church sends an STM team to a different host church each year; or it sends different people each year to the same host church. Given that mission is intrinsically relational, it is difficult to see the wisdom of such discontinuity. Conversely, a repeat trip
means that returnees can continue their friendships as well as their working relationships with their hosts, deepen mutual trust, and share in each other’s lives and ministries. For Nelson et al (2011, p38), such “mutuality” is a key concept, a ‘state of mind through which we, with humble sensitivity, work together, listening and learning with an attitude of genuine respect,’ seeing one another as ‘partners in God’s activity’ (p17). More meaningful partnerships for Moldovans would include exchange visits, sharing of prayer requests, and mutual encouragement.

_Cultural Sensitivity_

The second key factor in improving the effectiveness of short-term mission in Moldova was a recurring theme in the research interviews. Indeed, it is a commonplace complaint that short-term missionaries often display grave cultural insensitivity, what Livermore (2006) calls low “cultural intelligence.” Greater cultural sensitivity is important for a number of reasons: short-term missionaries who are more attuned to Moldovan culture are more likely to modify their behaviour. Such cultural sensitivity wins the respect of Moldovan hosts and reduces the likelihood of cross-cultural tensions. And cultural sensitivity means that members of the host community are more likely to be receptive to STM team outreach.

For foreigners to understand and safely navigate Moldovan culture and its religious nuances, they need a guide – somebody familiar with both cultures, such as a foreigner who has lived for several years in Moldova; or a Moldovan who has lived in the USA or the UK. However, at least one mission organization operating in Moldova takes a generic approach to STM training, bringing in temporary leaders for their teams, who may be skilled leaders but have not lived in Moldova and do not understand its culture.

_Feedback_

Here, we define “feedback” as _intentional and preferably two-way communication between relevant parties, which reflects upon shared experiences, with a deliberate aim of improving future participation and outcomes._

Feedback is important because as imperfect creatures we invariably make mistakes. It is important because cross-cultural communication can lead to misunderstandings, which can normally be clarified through feedback. It is important because constructive feedback enables us to mature as Christians. It is important because it enables us to see the world through the eyes of others. And it is important because the very act of sharing and encouraging through feedback can draw Christians together and increase their trust and unity, and hence their missional effectiveness.

What might biblical feedback look like – are there general principles to be discerned in the same way that we might discern a biblical approach to, say, leadership? This author proposes seven key values:

(i) Begin with Listening

As James writes to his ‘dear brothers and sisters…Everyone should be quick to listen’ (Jam 1:19a). Prov 18:13 adds that ‘to answer before listening – that is folly and shame.’ Both Old and New Testaments encourage Christians to listen to others before hastening to state their own opinion.

(ii) Accept Correction
Prov 12:1 states that ‘whoever loves discipline loves knowledge, but he who hates correction is stupid,’ and biblical wisdom instructs us that we must accept correction (in some translations, “criticism” or “reproof”) in order to learn and to grow in understanding.

(iii) Strengthen and Build Up
Biblical feedback does not undermine others but rather encourages those involved: ‘Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs (Eph 4:29). It is important to remember that encouragement is a spiritual gift (Rom 12:8) and that constructive feedback can be regarded as exercising this gift.

(iv) Do Not Judge
As one Christian gives feedback to another, he should be careful not to judge those with whom he has been working. The type of feedback that God would have us practise does not permit us to consider others inferior, and we should refrain from judging others altogether: ‘Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged’ (Matt 7:1-2a).

(v) Practise Humility, Gentleness, Love
Visiting short-term missionaries often have more formal theological training than their Moldovan co-workers. Such an imbalance means that when a short-term missionary proposes something, he is often accorded greater (and perhaps unmerited) status. But a biblical approach challenges such false claims to power: ‘be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love’ (Eph 4:2-3).

(vi) Be Slow to Anger
With the honest sharing of opinions and thoughts, comes the possibility of offence. But if we do find ourselves upset by feedback, we should heed the Bible’s advice and be ‘slow to become angry’ (Jam 1:19b). If we overreact to people’s feedback then we make it less likely they will share honest feedback in future.

(vii) Speak Truthfully
Finally, biblical feedback represents things fairly: ‘each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbour, for we are all members of one body’ (Eph 4:25). As well as avoiding untruths, it is important when giving feedback to avoid exaggeration, crass stereotypes and unwarranted assumptions – traps that short-term mission teams may fall into as they work cross-culturally but without time to understand that culture deeply.

Contextualised Feedback
Continuing to develop our theme of feedback as crucial for improving the effectiveness of short-term mission, and following on from our identification of biblical principles for the sharing of feedback, it is important to note that good feedback must be contextualised. That is to say, how feedback can be given, how it is received and understood, will vary from culture to culture. So whilst on a general level we may be able to recommend more or better feedback, on a practical level the nature of that feedback will necessarily differ. In Moldova,
pertinent issues which affect the nature of feedback include understanding power differentials between hosts and STM workers; and appropriate methods of communication, especially in societies which prioritise oral over written communication.

Further Missiological Implications

This study raises several questions with broader missiological implications, not least what is the role of short-term mission today? To many, it is a sign of God’s church being innovative as a younger generation of Christians responds in its own way to the serious task of global evangelization. Moldovan churches continue to invite short-term mission teams to serve alongside them, and are asking for deeper partnerships, not fewer. This strongly indicates that the short-term mission movement is considered effective by local churches, using their own criteria of usefulness, rather than ours.

Secondly, it should be a matter of concern that non-Western voices are practically inaudible – for every research piece exploring the perspective of host churches or host communities there are dozens commenting on the impact on team members. As Nelson et al note in their discussion of the local church’s role in global mission, ‘over and over again, our Southern partners remind us of the need to listen’ (2011, p120).

Thirdly, is there a distinctly Eastern European perspective on mission; a “second-world” missiology? In the last fifty years there has been much progress towards listening to “decentred,” feminist, postcolonial and other “non-Western” perspectives, whether from Africa, Asia or Latin America. This author suggests that, missiologically speaking, we also need to listen to different, quieter voices from within Europe and not it as a homogenous whole.

This research has shown that it is both possible and desirable to listen to the perspectives of those who receive short-term mission teams. This author encourages other researchers to investigate indigenous perspectives on short-term mission to complement the considerable amount of research conducted into sender/goer perspectives. With little modification, the survey used here could be applied to other countries.

Conclusion

This listening exercise was conducted in order to understand the perspectives of Moldovan church leaders hosting short-term mission teams and was based on the collective experience of nearly 400 short-term mission trips, together with informal feedback from many other Moldovans. It was important to give voice to Moldovans involved in short-term mission because around the world very few missiologists have prioritised host perspectives.

By listening to these perspectives, we have everything to gain: not only do we acquire a deeper understanding of the missional context; but we grow closer to our international brothers and sisters in faith. We honour host churches and host communities when we put their needs and priorities above our own desire for personal growth or “horizon-broadening.”

Our discussion of the effectiveness of short-term mission saw how, ultimately, host churches are in a better position to gauge the impact of missional activity. We also saw that effectiveness increases when we pay special attention to partnership, cultural sensitivity and feedback (which can be based on biblical principles). Such feedback should be contextualised, like so many aspects of cross-cultural mission.

As a missiological discipline, short-term mission is scarcely older than the Republic of Moldova, which gained its independence in 1991. For much of that time there has been sustained criticism of how we do short-term mission – but as the global church becomes
more experienced in this type of mission we trust it is also becoming more competent. As we learn from our mistakes, we must be alert both to the guidance of God’s Holy Spirit, and to the opinions of our international co-workers in Christ. Missiologists and missionaries need the humility to seek out and accept the perspectives of host Christians as we labour together as God’s fellow-workers (1 Cor 3:9a).

References


The Perceptions of a Missional Lifestyle amongst European Generation Y Christians

Author: Joanne Appleton, Graduate of Redcliffe College on the MA in European Mission and Intercultural Christianity programme. Joanne is co-editor of the quarterly research bulletin Vista (europeanmission.redcliffe.org), and Communications Manager at Redcliffe College. For a copy of her full dissertation, The Missional Lifestyle of European Generation Y: An analysis of influences and perceptions, email her at jappleton@redcliffe.org

Introduction

There is no doubt that the paradigm of mission today is changing. Mission takes place ‘from everywhere to everywhere’ (Escobar, 2003, p14), and Europe itself has become the focus of missionary effort for Christians from the Global South (Cueva, n.d., p3). Many larger churches send missionaries without reference to mission agencies, and the length of time people spend ‘on the field’ is shorter than before, with anything more than two years being perceived as long term (Miles, 2000, p9).

This research was inspired by attending a meeting of mission mobilisers where the topic under consideration was ‘inspiring 18-30 year olds to live a missional lifestyle’. As I drove home that afternoon, several thoughts struck me:

• If mission agencies are promoting a ‘missional lifestyle’ in order to attract 18-30 year olds (also known as Generation Y) to their agency, or to become involved in overseas mission, what will happen if Generation Y think a missional lifestyle is something different?

• Depending on their theological point of view, each person may have had a different perception of the meaning of ‘missional’.

• Most of the people in the room were over 30 and so not Generation Y. Differences in perceptions of a missional lifestyle may be due not only to theological perspectives, but generational differences.

I felt it was time to hear from Generation Y themselves in order to understand their perceptions of a missional lifestyle.

Generational theory and Generation Y

Generational theory assumes that people born at a particular time belong to a particular generational cohort, which differs in values and attitudes to those coming before or after it; an idea popularised by Strauss and Howe (1992) in their book Generations: The History of America’s Future.

Strauss and Howe build on the theories of Mannheim in his classic essay, The Problem of Generations (1952, p300). Generation Y are defined as those born between 1979 and 2002 (Tolbize, 2008, p8). A wide range of literature is available outlining their characteristics, however while empirical research on the topic offers ‘the most powerful evidence’ these kind of articles are ‘the fewest in number’ (Myers and Sadaghiani, 2010, p227). A danger with generational literature is a reliance on popular press articles written for non-experts, and popular literature written for organisations with a vested interest in knowing about Generation Y as well as empirical research. In addition, most of the literature is based on research amongst American college students, who are not necessarily representative of this age group world-wide. Where possible, I have referenced literature referring directly to European 18-30 year olds.
A missional lifestyle?

Van Gelder and Zscheile (2011, p3-4) helpfully identify the following commonalities in the ‘missional’ literature:

- God is a missionary God who sends the church into the world
- God’s mission in the world is related to the reign (kingdom) of God
- The missional church is an incarnational (versus an attractional) ministry sent to engage a postmodern, post-Christendom, globalized context
- The internal life of the missional church focuses on every believer living as a disciple engaging in mission.

There is the acknowledgement that ‘missional is a way of living, not an affiliation or activity’ (McNeal, 2009, pxiv), and not a model, a standardized programme or a strategy that can be applied to churches with a predetermined result ... the key is for ordinary church members to develop their capacity to listen to God’s word in community, to listen to the Spirit, and to listen to their neighbours in love. (Van Gelder and Zscheile, 2011, p165)

However, even with a proliferation of books, blogs and sermons on the subject how this translates into everyday life is not well understood by most Christians (Hirsch, 2008).

The research

I chose to conduct my research at Mission-Net, a pan-European conference for young people held over New Year 2012 in Erfurt, Germany. It aimed to attract 16–30-year-old Europeans who are willing to consider living a Christian missional lifestyle which allies spiritual expressions of faith with practical contributions to the common good of society. (www.mission-net.org, 2011)

As they were likely to be familiar with the idea of a missional lifestyle, if their perceptions differed from those of mission agencies or churches we could assume an even bigger gap in perception between mission agencies and young people who are in the church and not engaged in thinking about mission – or those outside the church altogether.

I gathered data through two small-scale online surveys. The first survey, conducted during and immediately after the conference, asked questions about perceptions of a missional lifestyle, and what influenced the respondents to live this way. The second questionnaire, sent to respondents about a month afterwards, looked at how they practiced a missional lifestyle, and what stopped them doing so.

Perceptions of a missional lifestyle

Overall, the answers to the two questionnaires reflected many of the themes identified in the ‘missional’ literature. This is not surprising, given that they identify books and well-known Christian speakers as influences on their thinking, as well as conferences where these ideas will be promoted from the platform. To take Mission-Net as an example, seminar streams included ‘Transform the World by Justice’, ‘Transform through Mission’ and ‘Transform to a Missional Lifestyle’ (Mission-Net, 2011, p22).

Generation Y’s perceptions of a missional lifestyle are discussed below.
1. Living missionally happens anywhere

One of the biggest tensions I perceived as I began this dissertation was the relationship between 'mission' and 'missional'. From conversations with various mission leaders, they were concerned that the emphasis on 'missional living right here' would stop young people being interested in mission 'over there'. This emphasis is reflected in some of the missional literature. For example, Frost (2006) uses the metaphor of 'exiles' who need to engage missionally with their host culture – but he assumes this is post-Christian Western culture.

From the surveys, while a missional lifestyle might require extra effort (for example, leaving your comfort zone) many respondents did associate the idea of missional with everyday life rather than going somewhere else:

- Meeting people where they are, understanding them first and sharing the everyday life with them. (26, Denmark)
- Being a missionary with words and deeds even when doing 'non-Christian' activities. (31, Germany)

As well as the location of a missional lifestyle being every day, missional living is perceived as an everyday activity. The majority of the respondents' missional heroes (those who were the best examples of a missional lifestyle) were people they knew personally. Many of these – although not the majority – were missionaries working in cross-cultural contexts, such as Thailand, Tanzania or Burma. But when asked why they were 'the best example of a missional lifestyle', the reasons given were very similar to the missional heroes who lived locally or were a family member.

For example, a 21-year-old German TCK talked about her mother as a good example of a missional lifestyle because:

They were on the mission field for quite a while, but that's not what I want to refer to here. What I really admire about my mother is that she is willing to reach out to ANYBODY. She always has an open home and invites people. She is constantly looking for opportunities to help people, show them kindness and to tell them about Jesus. And she isn't afraid of reaching out to the 'untouchables' in our society. It is important to her, what God wants her to do. She prays a lot. Her priorities are centred around Jesus. Of course she makes mistakes, but she lives out of God's grace.

While most respondents saw missional living as taking place in their own context, for a minority the concept of missional did include the idea of going elsewhere, for example:

- Having a calling from God to serve and live amongst a people group or nation he sends you to. Giving up things/worldly pleasures to go there loving the people and seeing it as your goal. It's for the people you are there for and not for your own purpose – God's purpose. (21, German, born in Sri Lanka)
- Start wherever you are. Follow God to whatever place he might lead you. (24, Switzerland)

This is in spite of three-quarters of the young people having experienced some form of cross-cultural mission in another country through short-term mission.

So, should mission leaders be concerned that the emphasis on a missional lifestyle in their own context will detract from a willingness to go elsewhere? While the sample was drawn from attendees at a mission-focused conference, who are more likely to be considering cross-cultural mission, the majority of those who completed the second questionnaire indicated they were either open to, or seriously considering, some form of long-term cross-cultural work. For example:
I have a calling from God and long-term mission is my goal … At the moment I’m studying environmental engineering in university and I feel that that profession can open doors to so-called closed countries. (19, Finland)

Depends on where God leads but am more than willing to serve him abroad or stay serving him in my own country. (27, UK)

While cross-cultural mission today is perceived from ‘everywhere to everywhere’ (Escobar, 2003, p14) rather than from the ‘West to the rest’, for those wanting to live a missional lifestyle being involved in ‘mission’ can happen anywhere. Being a long-term missionary (although still perceived as a ‘professional’ job by some) may or may not be part of it. Even when it does, the emphasis is on everyday activities – such as loving and serving people. The perception of these activities as part of a missional lifestyle is discussed below.

2. Living missionally involves loving and serving others

A 22-year-old from the UK, currently working with OM Hungary, considered a missional lifestyle to be ‘trusting God; putting others first; honouring God’s word; embracing others; loving those you are called to’.

A 17-year-old from Switzerland also saw a missional lifestyle as ‘Love, give and forgive persons around us.’ For her, the best example of this was an Asian missionary working in Switzerland because ‘they love and care so much for people around them’.

Serving people was the most frequently given reason why people were identified as missional heroes:

There is a man in the Swiss Alps who started by simply serving people through, for example, mowing their lawn for free. Eventually their neighbours asked why he did that. (24, Switzerland)

In the second questionnaire, I tried to discover what ‘serving people’ meant in the respondents’ contexts. A wide variety of answers gave an insight into their different contexts:

I’ve tried to spend my time with people that have few friends, giving advice and help in organizing things.

Refugee counselling.

I listen to people.

At home, helping my parents and siblings with the dishes or banal things like that. By picking up trash from the street that people dropped there. Not a big deal, but a little service and possibly an example.

And so, while serving people can mean being involved in specific ministries, there is the understanding that it also includes simple, even ‘banal’, actions like cleaning a bathroom.

But while the concept of focusing on meeting the needs of others ties in with missional theology (Zscheile, 2012, p25), it is countercultural for Generation Y, despite their need for relationship and community. They tend to have fewer siblings than previous generations, and parental attention is lavished on them. According to Myers and Sadaghiani (2010, p225) this has led to a generation who are ‘high in self-efficacy and … unusually self-assured’. When combined with marketing that is engineered around the individual (George, 2008, cited in Myers and Sadaghiani, 2010, p232), young people can become used to having their needs prioritised and met, rather than looking to meet the needs of others. Eventually, ‘everything revolves around the axis of one’s personal ego and personal life’ (Beck, 1992, cited in Savage and Collins-Mayo, 2006, p151).
This is reflected in a comment from a 19-year-old from Finland. When asked what made it difficult to serve others, he said:

*It’s easy to forget that this life isn’t all about me.*

And a 22-year-old from Denmark added:

*Difficult to put myself aside and see other people and what they need. I always focus on clearing my own back/minding my own business before being able to see the people around me.*

Other obstacles to serving others that were not mentioned so much included lack of time and pride:

*pride – it looks so pitiful to actually go on your knees and wipe up the mess someone else made. (18, Austria)*

*time/capacity. (27, UK)*

And so the challenge to help Generation Y to move beyond themselves to help others, remains. One major resource for missional living identified by the respondents was a deep relationship with God.

### 3. Living missionally requires a strong relationship with God

An 18-year-old from Austria saw missionaries like Hudson Taylor, Gladys Aylward and Jim Elliot as her missional heroes – in part due to their

*never-ending love for their Lord and Saviour – a heart for people – prayer – knowing the Bible*

whereas a 22-year-old from Austria admired her sister because,

*At first, she spends a lot of time with God. He is like a friend, just next to her. It’s really natural to be together with God for her. And then it’s just so natural for her to be among people, asking and listening to them and telling them how she experiences God.*

Gibbs (2009, p43) identifies a growing awareness of the importance of a deep relationship with God within those churches that are becoming more missional. Within the Generation Y community, Decker (2007) observes that ‘the convergence of the three streams of worship, spiritual formation and mission are clearly a hallmark of this generation’, despite many mission leaders being uncomfortable with the swing towards ‘exposure of “woundedness” and … adoption of spiritual practices that were not common in the Baptist church they grew up in’.

Spivey (2011) found that combining spiritual formation with missional outreach was more effective in helping his congregation grow ‘missionally’, than focusing solely on one or the other. Zscheile (2012, p24) argues that missional spiritual formation must be where ‘action and reflection, service and contemplation, individual and community are deeply integrated into a seamless rhythm’. The respondents reflect this sense of integration – but where Zscheile’s focus is on making the spiritual disciplines more missional, this group of young people perceive a deep relationship with God as the source of the ability to reach out missionally.
4. Jesus is the example of a missional lifestyle

The young people surveyed aspired to ‘live what Jesus did on earth’ (19-year-old, Germany) or ‘walk in Jesus’ footsteps’ (23-year-old, Denmark) as an essential element of a missional lifestyle.

‘Living like Jesus’ is a key part of missional theology. This particularly centres around the idea of being incarnational (Hirsch and Hirsch, 2010, p235) where Jesus is the supreme example of incarnation – ‘the Word became flesh and moved into the neighbourhood’ (Jn 1:14, The Message).

In order to discover exactly what the respondents meant by ‘living like Jesus’, in the second questionnaire I asked them to describe how they attempted this.

Answers included praying for people and loving them, including those you find difficult to like, being intentional – ‘thinking about what to do before I actually say something’ (18, Austria) – and, for a 19-year-old from Finland, ‘being connected to the church, in other words to other believers, spending time with God’.

As with serving others, a sense of self-centredness and pride make ‘living like Jesus’ difficult:

   My own pride and laziness. Negative thoughts about people. (20, Germany)

   It is still tough to meek and humble as Jesus is. (22, Denmark)

   Distraction by prioritising other things in this world. (31, Germany)

Therefore, while the numbers of respondents are too small to be representative, it is Jesus’ people-focus and the relationship with God that is particularly attractive to this group. The idea of being ‘incarnational’ is not very evident – although it could be argued that elements of the incarnational approach are seen in other perceptions of a missional lifestyle, such as serving others and living missionally in everyday life.

5. Living missionally means sharing the gospel

For this group, living a missional lifestyle also has a strong gospel emphasis. A 20-year-old from Germany considered ‘missional’ to mean ‘being open about one’s faith in Jesus and ready to share it any time’, while a 17-year-old from Switzerland saw it as ‘Not be shy to share the gospel and stand firm in faith.’

Sharing the gospel was also a reason given as why people were missional heroes. A 21-year-old from Germany admired his sister and some friends because they were ‘on fire for Jesus, can’t stop talking about him’.

And a 19-year-old from Finland talked about missionaries in Thailand who run a café and seek to build relationships with local people, saying that ‘they focus [on] the main thing, sharing the message of Christ’.

In order to find out what sharing the gospel looked like in practice for the respondents themselves, I used the second questionnaire to ask how they had brought the gospel to people in the couple of months since Mission-Net.

For several, bringing the gospel is about church-related activities, such as a regular children’s outreach or inviting classmates to a special event in their youth group. Involvement in a ‘bible group’ was also mentioned.

For others it happens in the context of everyday life through ‘sharing my testimony, listening to people and learning what they think’ (23, Finland) or ‘answering the questions my classmates have patiently and kindly’ (18, Austria).
A 31-year-old from Germany said a missional lifestyle was ‘living according to God’s ideas in all kinds of situations; being ready and looking out for opportunities to tell others about Jesus in ordinary daily life situations’. In the two months since Mission-Net, she had ‘bought Gospel of John booklets and distributed them to people I met in daily life’.

While the concept of ‘bringing the Gospel to people’ appears in practice to be words based, actions are also involved, as a 22-year-old from Denmark commented,

To tell about Jesus in the way we act and by talking with people. Wherever you are there is an opportunity.

Learning how to effectively contextualise and communicate the gospel to secular Europeans through words and actions is one of the biggest challenges this generation of Christians face, and the biggest hurdle identified by respondents was fear, for example

I’m afraid of what people would think about me. (17, Switzerland)

This is coupled with a lack of confidence and not being sure of how to share the gospel, as a 19-year-old from Finland stated:

Maybe the fear of what other people think about me. I’m not really good at sharing about Jesus with my friends although I have prayed about it.

Others echoed this feeling:

I do not really know how to do or how to reach people in my town. (28, Germany)

A 27-year-old from the UK also mentioned ‘western culture’, and a 19-year-old from Denmark said,

When people just accept that I’m a Christian it is tough to actually stir them…

These responses hint at the Western postmodern mindset that all truth is relative, and your truth (that is, being a Christian) is as valid my truth (a different belief). Many of the contemporaries of Generation Y Christians will buy into the ‘happy midi-narrative’ described by Savage and Mayo-Collins (2006, p37) – where there is no overarching ‘big story’ explaining why the world is as it is. It is enough for them to be ‘happy’ and there are ‘enough resources within the individual and his or her family and friends to enable “happiness to prevail”’. Some of these people may identify themselves as Christian because they belong through infant baptism, despite not believing or attending church, but they are ignorant of the truth claims of the gospel, including basic concepts such as sin (James, 2008, p9).

From a generational perspective, traditional apologetics may be too confrontational for a generation who prefer consensus and teamwork to conflict (Curtin et al., 2011, p13). And so, as this survey suggests, it is difficult for young people to feel confident in taking a stand for their faith. David James, a missionary working with young people in Austria, comments that sharing your testimony is one of the most effective tools for sharing the gospel in Europe:

In a broken world where patchwork families are the norm and alcohol is an escape, our personal testimony has great effect. Sharing our stories, in particular the hope and purpose we have found in Jesus, is far more effective than neat arguments at this stage. (2008, p9)

He also advocates building relationships, authenticity and living out the gospel message, as well as being patient – not giving up even if results do not come quickly. And therein lies another challenge for a generation who are conditioned to having immediate answers to their problems (Newman, 2008, p15).
6. **Social action and justice issues are not a high priority**

Alongside ‘calling all people to repentance, faith, baptism and obedient discipleship’, proclaiming the gospel is widely interpreted as ‘compassionate care for the needy, and to demonstrate the values and the power of the kingdom of God in striving for justice and peace and in caring for God’s creation’ (Lausanne, 2010).

Perhaps surprisingly then, only one person mentioned ‘social justice’ as an essential element of a missional lifestyle:

*Being authentic – to live like the Bible teaches us to do in all parts – social justice.*

(28, Germany)

One other mentioned the desire ‘to take care for peoples need everywhere in the world’ (24-year-old, Netherlands), while only one person mentioned the environment in terms of ‘love for God and his creation’ (18-year-old, Austria).

Neither social justice or creation care were mentioned as part of an authentic missional lifestyle, or even an aspect of the word ‘missional’.

It could be argued that this is partly due to the respondents’ church background – possibly because they belong to churches that emphasise gospel proclamation over social action.

Alternatively, it could be that the frequently mentioned idea of serving people encompassed that of social action, although only one of the responses about what serving people meant in practice was about refugee counselling – the others were much more within the respondents’ immediate context.

According to much of the literature, Generation Y are socially aware and have a passion for community and helping others (Burns et al., 2008, p103). However, while 93% of Americans ‘believe it is important to promote volunteerism, especially among youth’ (Kelton Research, 2007), less than half are personally involved. The others would prefer to read, watch TV or visit family during their free time, and perceive a ‘lack of time’ as the biggest barrier to volunteering. The numbers drop for younger generations – a Pew report found that in 2009, just over one-fifth of Generation Y Americans were involved in serving their community in some way (Volunteering in America, 2009, p1).

In a UK context, Moore (2011, p30) researched attitudes to corporate social responsibility (CSR), discovering that while his sample had:

> widespread sympathy and willingness to contribute to CSR efforts, the extent of commitment is actually very limited. The sample of [Generation Y] that has been surveyed appears to prefer a distant, somewhat passive relationship with CSR.

The latest Eurobarometer figures show much lower levels of community involvement or volunteering among European young people than those quoted above for the United States. Just over 10% were involved in an organisation aimed at improving the local community, and, of those, around half (5% of the total) had volunteered with organisations promoting ‘human rights or global development’, with 3% focusing on the environment. Figures for North Western European countries are slightly higher than average – for example, 8% of German and 11% of Danish young people promote human rights or global development (Eurobarometer, 2011, p5,9).

In a longitudinal study comparing American college students between 1979 and 2009, Konrath et al (2011, p187) found that levels of empathy towards others were much lower in present students than those of previous generations. The authors note a finding by Twenge et al (2008) that over the same period of time narcissism has risen in this population. These findings infer an increasingly self-centred generation who find it difficult to look beyond their own concerns to the needs of others.
7. A missional lifestyle is different from an authentic Christian lifestyle

The majority saw a missional lifestyle as ‘different from’ or ‘something more than’ living as an authentic Christian, as a 21-year-old TCK living in Germany states:

I believe essential elements of a missional lifestyle includes the essential elements of an authentic Christian lifestyle, but a missional lifestyle includes more obedience and trust.

This comment reflects a perception that something extra, in this case, more obedience and trust, is required in order to live missionally. For some, that ‘extra’ is a sense of self-sacrifice, such as moving out of your comfort zone, working hard or having courage.

Missionaries in Thailand who worked in the villages, a 22-year-old’s host parents and a Finnish media mission agency leader were identified as ‘courageous’, due to their commitment to live under persecution, endure hardship or live as Christians in a secular society.

The sense of self-sacrifice is reflected by a 27-year-old from Portugal, who saw a missional lifestyle as ‘faith, commitment and being able to leave our own comfort and safety in order to accomplish our mission’.

A 21-year-old from Germany sums up the idea of a missional lifestyle being perceived as more ‘radical’:

Well I think an authentic Christian lifestyle SHOULD BE a missional lifestyle … But we forget that too often and separate both. So only the ‘radical Christians’ live the missional lifestyle while the ‘normal Christians’ live the ‘normal’ Christian lifestyle.

These ideas can be reinforced by books and autobiographies of people who are living radically. Shane Claiborne, for example, was mentioned as an influence on perceptions of a missional lifestyle. He, along with Mother Theresa, was cited as a ‘missional hero’ by a 28-year-old from Germany, because they had ‘left their comfort zone and decided to serve people in simple and great ways as well’.

The kind of activities Shane Claiborne engaged in include community living, as well as occupying a church where homeless people lived to stop it being demolished and setting up a joint fund to pay for each other’s medical bills, rather than taking out medical insurance (Claiborne, 2006). If these activities are taken as normative for a missional lifestyle – or even what people should aspire to – then it is no wonder that it is seen as different from living as an ‘ordinary Christian’.

Living a missional lifestyle

Almost in exact parallel to my researching and writing this dissertation, my elder daughter, Ruth, took part in a church-based gap year programme, which was intentionally ‘missional’. She relished being involved in youth work and serving in the church, an enjoyed a short-term mission trip to North Africa. But one of her biggest struggles was trying to reconcile the desire to live a life of radical discipleship with wanting to have nice clothes and comfortable house. Could she be a radical disciple and middle class? Halfway through the year she felt called to spend time with God, deepening her relationship with him, rather than take on an extra job for two days a week. This meant she had only enough money for essentials. ‘I expected God to reward my faith by miraculous provision, like money dropping through the door in an envelope,’ she said. ‘This didn’t happen. Instead I had to live on very little and it was really hard.’

I began my dissertation assuming that most mission agencies thought a missional lifestyle was ‘what you do over there’, while Generation Y considered it to be ‘who you are, right here’. I discovered that for Generation Y, a missional lifestyle is ‘who you are, wherever you are’. But Ruth’s experience highlights some of the issues Generation Y face. They want to
live radically, but today’s culture of materialism, consumption and living for ‘here and now’ get in the way.

Not that this is a new problem. In Luke 9, a man wanted to follow Jesus wherever he went, and Jesus told him what this would cost: ‘Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head’ (Lk 9:58). Jesus challenged two others to a life of discipleship. For these would-be disciples, family commitments got in the way of ‘service in the kingdom of God’. Perhaps it is easy for us to dismiss these sayings as hyperbole; Jesus is obviously trying to make a point by overstating the case – isn’t he?

A missional lifestyle, at least for the young people who took part in this research, is about making a difference for God through loving and serving others wherever you are, sharing the gospel, living like Jesus and, for some, personal involvement in social justice. But is this enough? Is it possible to do these things the way Jesus wants you to, and live a comfortable life? Earlier in Luke 9:23, 24, Jesus tells his disciples:

If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever wants to lose his life for me will save it.

The implication is that sacrifice is part of the deal. The irony for a generation who have been so indulged and pampered may be that, while in theory, living a missional lifestyle could happen in everyday life wherever they are, for them to be able to make it happen they may have to be completely countercultural – as otherwise the pull to compromise is too strong.

References


The Levitical Priesthood and the Mission of God

Author: Nicholas Haydock, Graduate of Redcliffe College on the MA in Bible and Mission programme. Nicholas is currently serving with the Slovak university student movement ‘VBH’, an associate of IFES (International Fellowship of Evangelical Students). This paper is a summary of his dissertation.

Aim of the Thesis

The aim of my research was to provide a canonical theology of the Levitical priesthood and from there assess their role within God’s mission.

The Levites have either been neglected by evangelical theologians or misunderstood by their liberal counterparts. Liberal theology beginning with Wellhausen chose to see the priestly theology as the aftermath of a post-exilic political struggle which the Zadokites eventually won. It’s unnecessary to here go into the many reasons for refuting such a reading; but to say that my supposition is that a theology of the priesthood shows that far from being a political power seeking to justify their superiority, we see that their service was only acceptable when administered in humility.

With regard to the neglect shown by the evangelical church, the Levitical order is often labelled as the legalistic other, or dismissed as redundant now that Christ’s priesthood has superseded it. I seek to show the inaccuracy of these statements in my study primarily by pointing to the perpetual nature of God’s covenant with Levi, which is repeatedly affirmed. In seeking therefore to offer a canonical theology of the Levitical priesthood, I emphasise that God requires the priesthood to suffer humility; a ministry which is affirmed, continued and embodied in Christ’s priesthood.

More than just providing a canonical theology of the priesthood, my conviction is that such a reading must be ‘missional’; that is, it must place itself within the narrative of God’s mission to the world. My study seeks to achieve this in two ways; firstly by outlining the relationship between the Levites’ and the wider Israelite society. By viewing Israel from a sociological standpoint we can see that the Levites were to be an outward sign of a spiritual reality grasped by the nation as a whole. This is clearly observed in Ex. 19:6 where God calls the Israelite nation ‘a royal priesthood’; we see then that the function of the Levites is to inform the nation’s identity amongst and in relation to the nations which surround them. I am not of course the first to offer such an exposition of Ex. 19:6, however such expositions have previously been limited by the lack of a developed theology of the Levites.

Secondly, in addition to the Levites’ missional function towards the people, is their representation of a missional God. God, while being all powerful, chooses to suffer and humble himself due to his love for the world and consequent desire to reveal himself. To participate with God in his mission is therefore also to imitate God in suffering humility, and the Levites’ being central to Israel’s cultic life are a prime example of this fact.

Method and Structure

My research involved surveying the theology of the Levitical priesthood throughout the canon of scripture.

This does not mean that I determined to read the ‘Old Testament’ through the lens of the ‘New’. To be clear it was not my focus to make sense of the canon in light of the book of Hebrews, as many have sought to do, but rather to make sense of Hebrews in light of the wider testimony of the canon. This is not to suggest that I think there to be any great discrepancy between the two, but only to recognise the danger of misunderstanding the writer of Hebrews if read in isolation. At the same time I do not assume that ‘Old Testament
Theology' must be kept as a separate discipline, for we hold that there is a fundamental continuity in the theology of the canon.

At this point I might add that I do not consider the direction of the canon to be primarily 'christocentric', but rather 'theocentric' in that scripture is written for and by the people of God to inform them as they live out and within the will and purposes of their God. With regards to methodology therefore, my interest is primarily related to how this theological understanding of the priesthood informs and shapes the community of believers within the context of God’s mission. This is not to say that the priesthood do not point towards Christ. Where appropriate I draw on this aspect, but not so as to silence the primary concerns of the text.

In turning our attention to consider more carefully the shape of this research, my purpose was not so much to systematically analyse any and every mention of the Levites, but rather to draw out the main themes and metaphors which relate to the priesthood’s ideological identity. The findings of this study are therefore presented thematically, where each theme speaks of the suffering and humility required of the priesthood. In so doing I sought to cover the functions and metaphors ascribed to the priesthood and demonstrate their relationship to the overarching missional narrative and the concept of suffering humility. After placing the research within the context of biblical theology, sociology, missiology, I then expounded each function in turn. To conclude the study I then considered how our findings are reflected in the canon after Christ.

Key findings and Reflections

The Levitical priesthood provided both Israel and her scriptures with a rich theological base from which to reflect upon their God, his mission and their role within it. In the course of my study I trace themes such as holiness, slavery, landlessness, tithing, and the teaching of the Law among others, which all support our hypothesis; that Israel fulfills her missional identity in suffering humility, for which the priesthood is a prime informant.

In this final section I will offer a case study focusing on one aspect of the priesthood’s role, that of being a sacrifice. In doing so I hope firstly to demonstrate the outworking of our aims and methodology, and secondly to begin to consider the implications of my findings.

The Levites as a Holy Sacrifice

Israel was to be a ‘holy nation’ (Ex. 19:6), which would stand as a testimony to the surrounding nations of God’s loving kindness. Consequentially without holiness Israel could not measure up to the missional role given to them (Wright, 2006, p333). I suppose and elsewhere argue that holiness is a positioning of the self before God, to be of use in his mission; specifically this requires a posture of servitude and suffering. At the same time their sanctity is directly related to their sacrificial function.

The relationship between the priesthood’s holiness and their role as a sacrifice for the nation is clearly and most obviously seen in their consecration ceremony.

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, “Take the Levites from among the sons of Israel and cleanse them. Thus you shall do to them, for their cleansing: sprinkle purifying water on them, and let them use a razor over their whole body and wash their clothes, and they will be clean. Then let them take a bull with its grain offering, fine flour mixed with oil; and a second bull you shall take for a sin offering. So you shall present the Levites before the tent of meeting. You shall also assemble the whole congregation of the sons of Israel, and present the Levites before the Lord; and the sons of Israel shall lay their hands on the Levites. Aaron then shall present the Levites before the Lord as a wave offering from the sons of Israel, that they may qualify to perform the service of the Lord. Now the Levites shall lay their hands on the
heads of the bulls; then offer the one for a sin offering and the other for a burnt offering to the Lord, to make atonement for the Levites. You shall have the Levites stand before Aaron and before his sons so as to present them as a wave offering to the Lord. (Numbers 8:5-13, NASB)

This consecration ceremony which presents the Levites as an offering, qualifies them for service. The Levites devotion is ultimately to God (Levine, 2007, p442) who has assigned them to serve under the jurisdiction of the priests (Levine, 2007, p278). Just as an animal being sacrificed is representative of the offerer (Kiuchi, 1987, p112), so also the Levites are representative of the whole nation. This is demonstrated within the ceremony when the Israelites lay their hands on the Levites as the Levites are offered to the Lord. I should also point out that through this wave offering, the Levites redeem Israel's firstborn (Olson, 1996, p49), a point which will be explored further elsewhere.

This understanding that the Levitical priesthood were themselves meant to be a holy sacrifice on behalf of the people, also helps us to reflect theologically on the genealogical records contained in Ezra. 2-3 and Neh. 7.

Before the exile, David had divided the priesthood, according to the heads of twenty four Levitical families, with each taking different responsibilities (1. Chr. 24). However, among the home comers there were only four of these families present, which meant that the priestly tasks had to be redistributed (Kidner, 1979, p39). It seems that although most Jewish families kept records of their genealogies (1 Chr. 5:17), some of these records had been lost in the exilic period. In the case of the Levites, those unable to prove their lineage were not permitted to function as priests (Fensham, 1982, p55).

Many readers struggle to make sense of the genealogical records in Ezra; aside from making an uninviting read, it seems to be suggestive of racial exclusivism (Williamson, 1985, p38). Indeed the concern for pedigree certainly seems to have blossomed into a sense of superiority by the time of the New Testament (Kidner, 1979, p41); making it difficult for the Christian to square these passages with Jesus’ words of criticism (Matt. 3:9). In biblical scholarship also, the hereditary nature of the priesthood has often been misconstrued as the outworking of tribal politics (Tiemeyer, 2006, p198), and labeled ‘elitist’ (Milgrom, 2007, 53).

At other points in the study I demonstrated that the priesthood was not rigidly hereditary; people could be incorporated into it and cut off from it. In what sense and for what purpose then do these texts record and value the genealogies of the priests? I would suggest that a lineage which legitimized a Levite’s true descent from Levi, notions the idea that the Levites were to be an unblemished offering on behalf of the people. This concept is evidenced by the fact that the Levites number about a tenth of the returnees (Blenkinsopp, 1972, p98), the portion of Israel’s tithe and offering to God. The genealogies in Ezra therefore demonstrate that God had not abandoned his covenant with the Levites; they were to continue in their sacrificial ministry because he was committed to using them in his mission, even as he had determined to do in Num. 8.

Reflecting on their Role as Sacrifice

In order to extensively draw out the implications of this metaphor, we would have to first explore its connections with other themes such as holiness, the Levitical representation of the firstborn, tithing and their function in offering sacrifices. Nevertheless I wish to conclude this article by reflecting on one particular aspect of the 'Levites as Sacrifice', that being election.

That the Levites were the nation’s representatives before God does not mean that God loved them more than any other Israelite. Similarly Israel's election was not divine favouritism, but
the choosing of an instrument through which God’s love and justice would be declared to the world. I have already shown that the election of the priesthood was for the purpose of service, as indeed was the election of this priestly nation. Specifically both Num. 8 and the genealogical records in Ezra-Nehemiah reveal that their ministry necessitated sacrificial administration. For the people of God to truly appreciate their election in light of God’s mission, they must never lose sight of the call to offer themselves up as living sacrifices (Rom. 12:1).

For believers today, the Levitical priesthood provides us with an exciting platform upon which it is necessary to reflect, if we are to grasp our identity as a ‘royal priesthood’ (1 Pet. 2:9). The missional function of the priesthood cannot be reduced to words on a page, for in reality it is only realised by communities living out their priestly identity through meditation on the scriptures. I pray therefore that this research may aid the construction of this spiritual house, so that God’s greatness may be proclaimed (1 Pet. 2:5).

References


A Critical Evaluation of the Contextualisation of Alpha France

Author: Amy Roche, Postgraduate student at Redcliffe College on the MA in Bible and Mission programme and mission partner with CMS, based in France. This essay was originally submitted as part of the module, Bible Engagement in Intercultural Contexts.

Introduction

Alpha France seems to present a great paradox in terms of a culturally transferable piece of Bible Engagement. Being a high profile programme of evangelism supported by all the major denominations, there are now, according to the Alpha website (2012), over 55,000 Alpha courses worldwide in over 166 countries. Yet alongside its success, Alpha has received a number of compelling criticisms including accusations of its resistance to ‘local adaptation in favour of the need for consistency’ (Ireland, 2005, p20). In view of this, an identification of three specific distinctives of French culture will provide a framework to an examination of themes and language within the texts and talks that require particular sensitivity in translation. A fusion of Bible and Mission scholarship with an analysis of the way these themes are communicated will enable a critical evaluation of Alpha France as a tool of mission.

Alpha originated at the London Anglican church, Holy Trinity Brompton. It was developed by Nicky Gumbel and was first published in 1993. The course consists of 10 weekly talks which take place in the setting of a meal and many guests come in response to invitations from a friend. The opportunity is given for discussion around tables following the talk. Although an invitation is offered during the course for people to commit their lives to Jesus, and a day or weekend away is dedicated to the opportunity to experience as well as learn about the Holy Spirit, a major feature of the course is its intention to allow people to explore the Christian faith without feeling pressured to have to do so.

Alpha's Translation into France

It was the ‘stimulating’ and ‘welcoming’ atmosphere (de Leyritz, 2007, p57), that first impressed the French couple Marc and Florence de Leyritz, who first discovered Alpha in London in 1997. Following this, de Leyritz, (now president of Alpha France), encountered an enthusiastic response to his first Alpha course in a francophone Catholic parish in London. Subsequently, during 1999, a meeting of Catholic bishops was organised, ‘le Conseil Permanent de la Conférence des Evêques de France’ (de Leyritz, 2007, pp68-93), initiating trial Alpha courses and creating a board, in accordance with the authors of Alpha, to rework aspects of language from which objections had arisen.

In January 2001 the final text was agreed. Over the following 7 years after Alpha France was launched in France the numbers of churches running the course increased from 30 to 480, and the number of people attending from around 1000 to well over 53,000. According to the Christian Community Foundation of France (CCFOF, 2012) it achieved in this time ‘the type of impact that successful Christian movements have had in 20 years’. This is measured in terms of the number of people reached by the Gospel, number of Christians trained, and positive coverage in Christian media.

Criticism of Inflexibility

Like conversion, translation rests on ‘the principle of revision’ and is ‘not a single aoristic act, but a process’ (Walls, 1996, pp29, 28). However, in contradiction with this principle, Alpha is
accused of remaining rigid to its original, narrow contextualisation towards prosperous young professionals, expressed in Ireland’s complaint (2005, p5) against the ‘lack of freedom to adapt the course to fit either the spirituality of the church or the needs of a particular group’. This is a reasonable objection in light of his correct observation regarding HTB’s insistence of tight adherence to the Alpha copyright, which Ireland protests amounts to the creation of an Alpha ‘brand’ (Ireland, 2005, p5). This view mirrors an extensively reported criticism voiced by Pete Ward (an adviser to the Archbishop of Canterbury) who criticised HTB’s ‘pattern of control’ (Garner, 1999). Borrowing a phrase from the American social historian George Ritzer, who wrote about the ‘McDonaldization’ of society, Ward protests that Alpha is responsible for the ‘McDonaldization of religion’ (Garner, 1999).

Choosing, nevertheless, to cite McDonalds in his response, Ireland highlights Gumbel’s advocacy for the need for uniformity in Alpha wherever it is offered, insisting that, ‘if I went to McDonalds in Moscow and was given a ham sandwich, I would say that is not on’ (Ireland, 2005, p20). This underlines particular irony in the context of Alpha France, in view of the generally recognised French disapproval of McDonald’s, demonstrated in the overwhelming public support for the actions of the sheep farmer José Bové, who in August 1999 dismantled a McDonald’s restaurant in protest against globalization. The reaction is emphasised by Gordon (2001, p22), citing the article in newspaper Le Monde (1999), ‘McDonald’s commercial hegemony threatens our agriculture and its cultural hegemony insidiously ruins alimentary behaviour - both sacred reflections of the French identity’ (Gordon, 2001, p30).

Such a refusal to be tailored, however, echoes the previous paradigm of stereotypically structured church refuted in John Drane’s acclaimed book ‘McDonaldization of the Church’ (2000). This contradicts the essential principle of interculturation, which, for Bosch (1991, p453) requires that Christians ‘no longer participate as the ones who have all the answers but are learners like everybody else’. For this reason it must be justified whether Alpha France is locked into the old paradigm, demonstrating an inability to contextualise as a piece of Bible Engagement in translation. Such an evaluation may be discerned in light of the identification of the ‘distinctives’ of French culture, which, according to Walls (1996, p29), form the focus to which, ‘the word about Christ is applied’. This is underlined by the fact that translation is not just a question of language, but rather ‘of all that languages signify and embody; that fullness of specific human experience which we describe with the term “culture”’ (Guder, 2000, p82).

French Culture

  i) A La Table!

‘Of all the components of French cultural identity, food may be one of the most universally recognized internationally’ (Gordon, 2001, p30). Being significant not only to France’s pride in famous cuisine, the context of a meal also contributes to what Hassenforder (2001, p12) describes as ‘Alpha culture’, incorporating la convivialité, friendship, friendliness and respect, which enable the opportunity to discuss and debate. In direct opposition to the description of a fast-food-style franchise, de Leyritz’s (2007, p57) describes Alpha as providing an open and inviting atmosphere that is adaptable to the needs of each person (‘un référential commun, adaptable à l’environnement commun de chacun’).The importance of this informal environment of a meal (culturally contextualised with the essential addition of red wine!) is also recognised by Hassenforder (2003), affirming the way it corresponds to l’esprit du temps’. Moreover, the successful translation of this Alpha culture is evidenced in recent research published in the mainstream newspaper le Parisien (2011). According to this article, the majority of French people (58%) either believe in God or wonder about his existence and an astonishing 62% express a desire for an opportunity to discuss their thoughts in an ‘environment of trust’ (Juillet, 2011, p2).
ii) Lack of Biblical Tradition

According to Bjork, (1997, p33) one of the most significant distinctives of French culture impacting Bible Engagement is identified in ‘the absence of a strong biblical tradition’, which he argues contributes to a society of ‘utter secularity’ (Bjork, 1997, p32). This is demonstrated in the controversial legal bill passed by President Jacques Chirac in March, 2004, banning the wearing of visible religious symbols in all primary and secondary schools.

Since the early 1900’s, religious education in Secondary schools has been replaced by a civic, legal and social education ‘ECJS’, (education civique, juridique et sociale). Faith is, likewise, excluded from the primary curriculum. An explanation of the Christmas story does not feature any mention of Jesus, but only 'le Papa Noel', sometimes referred to in popular Christmas songs as ‘le Très-Haut’, meaning literally, ‘the Most-High’. A translation of the gospel message must therefore be sensitive to avoid a mistaken overemphasis upon Bible knowledge and a Biblical world view.

iii) Catholicism

Explaining the emergence of such a gulf between popular culture and the Bible, Bjork describes the relationship today between France and its Catholic heritage, clarifying that French people who commonly use the term ‘Catholic’ or ‘Christian’ to identify themselves are usually not referring to their worldview. However, the paradox exists in the tension resulting from the fact that although ‘the average Frenchman does not practice his Catholic faith, it is an integral part of his identity and social convention’ (Bjork, 1986, p36). Although it is important to note the author does not misinterpret this generalisation to ignore the complexities of subcultures and other faiths in France, being almost two thirds of the population, marks the significance of this Catholic ‘subsocietal group’ (Bjork,1986, p36) as a cultural ‘distinctive’.

Alpha is run by thousands of Catholic parishes in more than 65 countries around the world, who, according to the UK Alpha website, (2012) consider it to present the ‘kerygma’, which ‘all the major denominations agree about’ and is entirely compatible with Catholic teaching when used as part of ‘an overall parish programme of evangelisation or catechesis.’

In spite of this, two principle objections have been expressed from an opposing Catholic perspective, projected forcefully in Cork’s refutation (2012) of Alpha’s claim to represent the core of Christianity, insisting that it represents instead a narrow Charismatic Protestant theological agenda. This is convincingly evidenced in Cork’s following comparison of space given to various subjects: ‘Contrasting the one small paragraph on Baptism, and the two pages on ‘Holy Communion’, with the eight pages on ‘speaking in tongues’ and sixteen pages on ‘healing’, we get a truer sense of what Alpha is about’ (Cork, 2012).

Criticism regarding disproportionate emphasis on Charismatic theology is especially poignant in a French context in light of the fact that, according to the CCFF website (2012), an enormous ‘35,000 out of the 36,551 cites/towns/villages in France are without an Evangelical church’. For this reason, being such a minority (0.5% - 0.8% of the population), ‘French Evangelicals are often viewed as being part of a cult’ (CCFF, 2012). Cork also protests that, even with a Catholic supplement ‘tacked on’, it represents an individualistic gospel, reduced to ‘me and Jesus’ and therefore ‘cannot be recommended for Catholic use’ (Cork, 2012). Such criticism will be a key feature in the following evaluation of French Alpha, being in a country where ‘the majority of these people still consider the Catholic Church to be The Christian Church!’ (Bjork, 1997, p36)

Walls (1996, p8) correctly highlights that becoming ‘a new creation’ does not take place in a vacuum and it is impossible to ‘separate an individual from his social relationships and thus from his society’ (1996, p7). This principle, which he calls the ‘indigenizing principle’ was
demonstrated in Acts 15, when the decision of the Jerusalem Council to allow Gentile converts ‘a place to feel at home’ (Walls, 1996, p8). In the context of this principle, it is tragic to note the observation of missionary Kent Good which, he grieves, is all too common: ‘When you become a Christian in France, you have to abandon part of what it means to be French. Being Catholic is as much a part of being French as being born in the country. So you have to give up a lot’ (Bjork, 1997, p12).

iv) Philosophy

Philosophy features increasingly in the core of the French secondary teaching. In a recent radio broadcast on Radio France International (RFI), (2010) entitled ‘French 15-year-olds will soon be discussing Descartes and Socrates’ the current Education minister, Luc Chatel is cited, speaking at the UN cultural arm Unesco during its World Philosophy Day in Paris. Chatel advocated his decision to introduce more philosophy in Lycées, stating that ‘in this time of globalisation which is worrisome, and sometimes causes people to turn inwards; without a doubt, the world needs philosophy’ (RFI, 2010). This demonstrates an intentional lean towards human reason that further exacerbates in France the shift broadly experienced across Western European society. Using the term ‘ultramodernité’, French sociologist Yves Lambert depicts French society in terms of a general ‘rejection of traditional and religious sources of authority in favour of reason’ (Comeau, 2002, p522). The most relevant effect of this to our discussion is the further diminishing of the acceptance of the Bible as the authoritative Word of God.

This has also been a factor in the ‘disassociating of the spiritual need and the question of truth’ (Colin, 2000, p71). Commonly termed by sociologists as ‘bricolage religieux’ (‘religious DIY’), this pluralistic philosophy consists of ‘borrowing from one or another method of spirituality without adhering to the world view which justifies those spiritualities by anchoring them in reality’ (Colin, 2000, p71).

Critical Evaluation of the translation

Such underlying cultural assumptions bear direct relevance to the translation of a Bible-based evangelistic course, as highlighted by Eddie Arthur, (2008) ‘the role of a Bible translator is to adapt Scripture in an appropriate fashion for a given cultural and linguistic setting’. Having identified specific ‘distinctives’ of this setting, an analysis of the linguistic translation will focus on the Alpha Manuals (referred to using the abbreviations (AMUK) for the English and (AMFR) for the French version) and Gumbel’s original audio-video talks which have been recently remade in French, with Marc de Leyritz speaking. In order to allow meaningful detail within the restrictions of this essay it will be helpful to focus on the first session, which, serving as an introduction to Alpha, must meet visitors at their starting point in order to inspire them to proceed with the course.

i) Overview

An overall comparison reveals alterations in the translated content of Alpha France which demonstrate sensitivity to the underlying identification and respect of the Catholic Church. For instance the addition of an explanation before the contents page of the French manual explains not only how the course runs but also the fact that Alpha has expanded across the world within all denominations of Christianity (AMFR, p4), serving to recognise unity and inferring a stamp of approval from the Catholic Church. The word ‘parish’ is also added in French to replace the single phrase ‘local church’ (AMUK, p57) with ‘La paroisse / l’église locale’ (AMFR, p65). In placing the French Catholic term (parish) before the independent
protestant term for church, this serves to be especially inclusive to a Catholic perspective. Similarly changes are made throughout from ‘Pastor’ to include ‘Priest or Pastor’.

Humour is effectively adapted to avoid a culturally inappropriate implication of disrespect. Toning down humorous implications from around half of the sketches in the English manual, for example in Chapter 7, ‘How can I Resist Evil?’, the English cartoon depicts a man wondering if ‘garlic’ might help (AMUK, p41), while the French shows him reading the Bible (AMFR, p47). De Leyritz also makes appropriate replacements of humorous anecdotes relating to French society, rather than UK culture and includes several references that link with the Catholic Church in stories or quotations. For example, in the Introductory Talk, Gumbel portrays the human need for God citing Freddie Mercury as a man who had everything but despaired he felt like the ‘loneliest man on earth’ (An Introduction to Alpha, 2012). De Leyritz replaces this with the words of a Priest, who emphasised the need to know if there is life before death; ‘il faut savoir s’il y a une vie avant la mort’. Similarly, an extra quotation is listed from Pope Jean-Paul II (AMFR, 2006, p28) to contribute to the list of quotations used to argue the need for common sense in following God’s guidance.

ii) Sensitivity to Catholic Culture

In light of Cork’s criticism of an over-Charismatic agenda, it is significant to note that the proportion of space given to the subjects is altered in translation. For instance, the third weekend talk, entitled ‘How can I be filled with the Holy Spirit?’ (AMUK, p37-40), omits over 2 pages and fifteen bullet points in the French (AMFR, p45-46), most of which discuss the gift of tongues. This is substituted with the brief statement that the disciples received a new language; ‘Ils ont reçu un nouveau langage’. The word ‘langage’ (language) is used in place of the word ‘langue’ (tongue) which is the word used in the major French Bible translations (for example Louis Seconde and Le Semeur). This exchange serves to retain a sympathetic ambiguity regarding the nature of the language received by the Holy Spirit, i.e., angelic or human. This is a helpful subtlety which allows room for flexibility within denominational interpretation. Similarly, chapter 9, a study of the practice of ‘Healing Today’ omits the inclusion of the English subheading ‘Words of Knowledge’ and the following list of ways to experience this gift, such as ‘pictures’ and ‘sympathy pain’ (AMUK, p55).

The question in the Introductory Chapter, (AMUK, p1) regarding ‘what has [Christianity] got to do with life today?’ is personalised to become ‘my life today’, (‘ma vie d’aujourd’hui’) (AMFR, p7). This personalisation is echoed in de Leyritz’s Introductory Talk. In view of the ‘autonomous individualism’ (Comeau, 2002, p522) broadly recognised in French society, this is an insightful way to meet a French listener at their starting point.

However the following two instances of translation into French miss an essential opportunity to contextualise personal faith in terms of the Church, which would bring a balance necessary to avoid presenting the individualistic Christianity of which Alpha is accused. Firstly, at the end of session 1, the ‘birth and growth of the Christian Church’ (AMUK, p8) is highlighted as a consequence following the life of Jesus. This context of belonging to God’s people brings perspective to the question of faith in the public and private arenas. Secondly, in the first weekend session entitled ‘Who is the Holy Spirit?’ a link is drawn in the English text between water baptism and baptism in the Spirit, involving an explanation of the Greek term ‘baptizo’, meaning ‘to overwhelm, immerse’ (AMUK, p40). This is reinforced with three additional examples from the life of Jesus including the fact that Jesus received power from the Holy Spirit at his baptism (AMUK, p32). These links helpfully ground in Church community, a concept that may be negatively misunderstood as heavily dependent on personal experience, and perhaps Cultish.

Chapter 6, entitled ‘How does God Guide us?’ contains a subheading discussing the ‘counsel of saints’ (AMUK, p28) or ‘Le conseil des saints’ (AMFR, p34). Based on several Proverbs,
the intended meaning is to direct a believer to listen to the advice of other Christians. However, the implication of the word ‘saint’ to the majority of a French audience strongly denotes canonized saints and the souls of people who have died, compounded by the common Catholic practice of praying to Saints for guidance and protection - which caused misunderstanding during an Alpha group in Perpignan, France, in October 2011 (my own context). The expression could easily be reworded to avoid this.

iii) c) Bible Engagement, the Metanarrative

Having discussed the increasing chasm in France between assumptions about reality from a Biblical worldview, it is unfortunate that three elements of the overarching story of God’s redemptive purpose in *missio Dei* are inadequately translated in the manual. Firstly, the idea of mankind being created in God’s image is mentioned briefly in both editions (AMUK,p 2, AMUK, p8). However it would be appropriate to a more highly secularised society to allow time in French Alpha to linger on the subject of creation, and in particular to explore the crucial concept of God’s purpose for his creation. Moreover, while extra supplementary reading is listed at the end to enable further study of this theme, there is nothing listed in the French (nor for any other chapter) which is a significant flaw to effective Bible Engagement. Although Gumbel’s *Questions of Life* was not published in French until 2006, other French sources should be recommended.

Secondly, (AMFR, p10) the French focus is more closely on five claims that Jesus makes about himself, while the English text goes on to explore an additional six points noting the invitations to respond to Jesus, such as ‘receive me’ and ‘welcome me’(AMUK, p5). This adaptation appropriately simplifies the focus on Jesus as; the bread of life, (John 6:35), the light of world (John 8:12) and the resurrection (John 11:25) (AMFR, p11) and crucially allows space for the inclusion of fuller Bible citations in the text. These Scriptures connect with the most attended Catholic occasions of first Communion, Christmas Mass, and funerals. In this way a connection is created to what may be familiar of the Bible to honour what is already known, reinforcing the unity of the Message across denominations. Conversely a similar opportunity is missed in session 2 entitled ‘Why Did Jesus Die?’ where the crucial Scripture, John 3:16, is majored in a text box in English, (AMUK, p8) but is inexplicably missing in the French booklet.

Thirdly, the Model of the Lord’s Prayer involves the addition of three (AMUK, p19) additional explanations of the Kingdom of God in English, which are omitted in French. This includes the return of Jesus. Although certain theological simplifications elsewhere are helpful, (such as the ‘self-substitution of God’ (AMUK, p10) that is translated simply as ‘he died for us’), the return of Jesus is imperative to the Bible’s Metanarrative. For this reason it should not have been ignored.

iv) Bible Authority

In Session 1 the phrase ‘Sources of evidence outside the New Testament’ (AMUK, p3), is poorly translated as ‘Sources non-Chrétienées’. Such categorising in terms of ‘non-Christian sources’ implies a false distinction between the discipline of History from ‘Christian history’. This risks a reinforcement of the cultural gulf between beliefs relating to God and ‘facts’ about the world, which Bjork (1997, p32) exacts in terms of French culture,

Revolutions against political authority called into question divine authority [...] Liberalism in thought lead to scepticism. These secularizing forces affected most of Western society [...] but in France generations of religious and ideological conflict led to what some have labelled “utter secularity”
In the English manual, ‘the Bible’ is listed first in response to the question why we should believe that the Devil exists (AMUK, p42). In French, la Bible is listed third, following the subheadings of ‘Le bon sens’ (common sense) and ‘L’expérience chrétienne’ (AMFR, p48).

It may be argued that it makes sense to use the Bible to reinforce something true that may be known by human intellect and experience in a context where, as discussed above, Biblical authority is not an easily accepted concept. However, the following example shows a missed opportunity to help reintroduce faith in the Word: following the discussion in Session 6, ‘How God guides us’, a list is given (AMUK, p27) of four ways to test if it is really God, which include the crucial question ‘is it in line with the Bible?’. This is also unjustifiably omitted in French, undermining the fundamental Christian principle of Biblical authority.

v) French Philosophy

Certain examples of translation reflect the cultural conception of objective truth and reality which in France is more strongly influenced by scepticism, linking with the widely studied French rationalist philosopher, René Descartes. Featuring in the introductory discussion of Christianity, the English term ‘reality’ (p1) is replaced in French by ‘Le sens du real’ (p7), meaning ‘the sense of something real’. However, in contradiction with the accusations facing Alpha’s inability to adapt, de Leyritz uses several excellent revisions, evidenced in the following example.

In discussing the implications of Jesus statement “I am the Truth” he begins with Gumbel’s metaphor of the way an aerial connects a television to bring a clear picture, rather than the fuzzy, intermittent transmission it received before. This is a crucial acknowledgement that the idea of absolute truth is generally counter-cultural in the post-modern West. But there is a difference in the way the two speakers proceed to argue that something must either be ‘true for no one’, or ‘true for everyone’. In a society in philosophical discussion of reality replaces religious truth in moral and political spheres, a philosophical defence of the possibility of absolute truth is of primary relevance and is a crucial bridge to enable a French audience to be open to what follows from the premise that Jesus is the Truth.

He therefore goes on to make the point that people have a legitimate suspicion regarding something that claims to be truth, due to the gap that often exists in our society between the way reality is portrayed in popular culture, from what is actually real. Such a false reality is ‘constantly put before us on our screens’ (‘le real est ce qu’on fait paraître sur l’écran’) such as ‘l’air de Disneyland, de Nintendo’. But, he argues, this is not real, it is not truth. De Leyritz rightly does not presume that a cautious audience can or should simply make the jump to accepting the concept of absolute truth and provides the logical step that if something may be correctly agreed upon as not the truth, then the reverse may also be possible.

This is an important development from the television metaphor, to which a French audience may respond with the problem that, even with the aerial, how do I know that what is being transmitted is true? This is because such a depiction of a separation between ‘truth’ from perceived reality is reminiscent of Descartes’ scepticism. According to this philosophy, external data, such as what we see and touch, enters the mind via the senses and is encountered in an undisclosed world of experience, like a private theatre within the mind. This image remains a popular symbol of a separation between reality which is mediated via infallible senses from knowledge perceived in the conscious mind.

De Leyritz’s picture of the world mediated to people via the unreliable screen therefore makes a simple but important connection to the faulty theatre. He then recounts another good-humoured anecdote, involving a pilot who is about to land his plane, following the data received on his screen. However a technological fault is causing the monitor to display a reversal of ‘right’ from ‘left’. As de Leyritz underlines, ‘for the pilot the screen is not a true reflection of reality - unlike the mountain he just flew into!’ (my translation). In this way, the
French translation reinforces that a ‘reality’ or truth must exist, and that is God. This makes Gumbel’s initial implication that Jesus is claiming to be like the authentic ‘aerial’ which connects us to him, more culturally accessible.

**Conclusion**

Contrary to criticism, a focus upon three ‘distinctives’ evident in French culture, Alpha France has shown a significant degree of a willingness to be ‘tailored’, demonstrating effective cultural contextualisation. This is owed in part, as Rompaey rightly discerns, to the patient process of translation involving Catholic Bishops as well as French and UK protestant leaders; creating, in Alpha France, the paradox a ‘space of freedom that is structured by theologians’ (Rompaey, 2010).

In a country which has suffered a history of notorious religious conflict, Alpha’s contribution to the work of Church unity is a significant achievement recognised in media coverage, exemplified in the Newspaper *Ouest France*, which, cited inside the cover of de Leyritz’s book (2007), reports ‘c’est un peu l’Assimil de la foi chrétienne’. This likens Alpha France to a Christian version of best-selling language course ‘l'Assimil’ popular for making languages accessible to everyone.

More than just evangelism, Alpha France enables spiritual formation advocated as it breaks the mould of a passive congregation not only encouraging ‘dialogue and participation’ but also the ‘involvement of church members and the use of their gifts’ (Hassenforder, 2001, pp12-13) creating, what Hassenforder (2003) describes as a new culture, ‘la culture Alpha’. This may be seen as ‘a witness to the unifying power of the gospel which supersedes all cultural divisions’ (Guder, 2000, p69).

Alpha France is not a perfect example of Bible Engagement, and Rompaey overstates (2010) its virtues in crediting it as presenting the ‘purity of the Gospel message’ (‘la pureté du message évangélique). It omits certain Bible texts that are essential to the theme of *missio Dei* and contains avoidable ambiguities. Many European Baptists also criticise Alpha’s lack of attention to ‘baptism’ and ‘holistic community discipleship’ and paradoxically ‘incorrectly perceive it as Roman Catholic’ (Jackson, 2005, p1). However the irony of such an interpretation serves as evidence to the impossibility of achieving flawless translation, which ‘takes place in the ambiguity of human frailty and cultural limitations’ (Guder, 2000, p92). Yet despite aspects of translation in Alpha France that may benefit from a greater commitment to Walls’ principle (1996, p9) of ‘continuous revision’, evidence shows that God is powerfully at work to bring about restoration and redemption in France according his purpose revealed in the *missio Dei*. As Hassenforder (2003) brings into perspective, it is ‘by the grace of God he uses means and processes of touching people with his Word’. He is using not only the message but also the atmosphere symbolic of the triune characteristics of trust, friendship and unity that is recognised by the French as the ‘culture’ of Alpha France.

**Citations**


CC Federation of France [Accessed 10 December 2011].


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