A WORD TO AGENCY TRUSTEES

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Category: Observations

There is one thing, above everything else, that will have an impact on the effectiveness and relevance of the ministry of a mission agency: the way in which the agency relates to the global Church.

Christianity is growing around the world and the majority of believers are no longer of European descent. And, would you believe it, these Christians are developing their own traditions, approaches to ministry and understandings of the Bible based on their context (as opposed to understanding based on our context).

The upshot is that we simply can't assume that we can go and minister in other people's back yard without taking their views and understandings into account. For example, you cannot pick up a discipleship or theology course from the UK and assume it will apply in other contexts - some of it will, but much of it won't. Mission must be carried out in dialogue with the believers on the ground.

The vast majority of missionaries realise this and at the grassroots level, there is a great deal of fellowship, dialogue and mutual respect. Not as much as there should be, perhaps, but progress is being made.

However, agencies need to adapt at the strategic level, not just at the grassroots. We need to change the way in which we understand and promote our work and our agencies, and boards have a key role to play in this. This means that boards need input from the people on the ground where they work. This input should be unfiltered, it is not enough to have missionaries tell you how local people think about their work. Ideally, you should be hearing from people who don't use your services as well as those who do. The best way to achieve this is to have representatives from the communities that you serve on the board, though this may well not be practical for all sorts of other reasons.

This year, there is an excellent opportunity for agency boards to get input from some leading thinkers from around the world, without having to travel too far. The Global Connections Conference in May is entitled *Global Voices: What if We Really Listened?* and provides a setting for agency boards to get the sort of input that they need as they plan for the future.

The conference speakers are Oscar Muiru from Kenya, Ruth Padilla DeBorst from Latin America and Vinoth Ramchandra from Sri Lanka. These are the sorts of people that mission agency boards need to hear from if they are to successfully guide their organisations into the future.

Opportunities like this don't arrive very often and they need to be seized with both hands when they do. I would expect that any agency which thinks seriously about its work would ensure that some staff members attend this conference. However, I would go further and say that if agency boards don't send a representative or two, then they are not taking their role seriously. I know that this is a strong statement, but I make no apologies for it.