THE ALPHABET SOUP OF MISSION AGENCIES

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Category: Observations

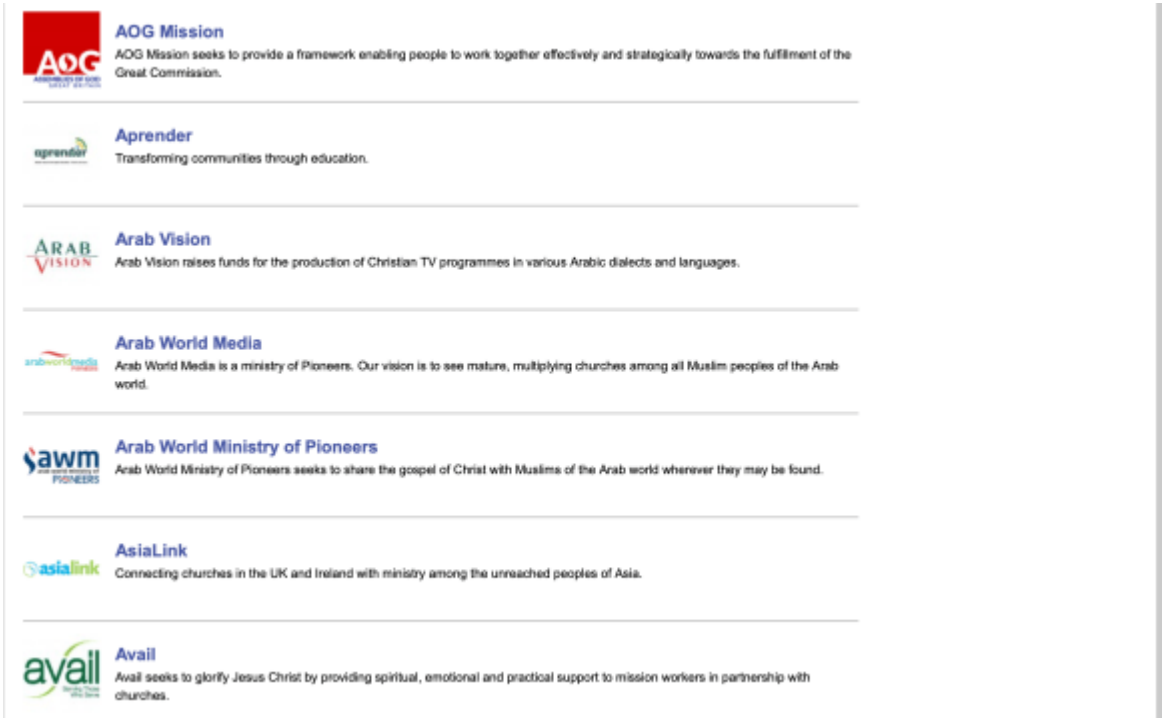
Following on from Friday's post about what I'd like to see in mission agency annual reports, I received the following comment on Twitter:

> *In the spirit of helping local church leaders navigate this: Which items from the list would you consider non-negotiables in the annual report? My knowledge of the alphabet soup of mission agencies isn't great, and I'd like to know what I should be keeping my eyes peeled for!*

To be honest, I found this rather challenging and I'm not sure that I have a good answer to the question. Part of my problem is that the question doesn't start at the right point. This is because my correspondent was referring to my blog post which looked at agency annual reports. The thing is, if you don't know much about agencies, I'm not convinced that the annual reports are a good place to start in your exploration. My problem is that I'm not sure where I'd suggest starting.

I think the description of an "alphabet soup of mission agencies" is brilliant. There are lots and lots of agencies out there, many of them described by an apparently random series of letters. Navigating your way around the various agencies - their work, their claims and their requests for support - is not for the faint-hearted.

There isn't any easy to use register of mission agencies in the UK. The best resource that I know is the Global Connections list of agencies. This provides a short description and links for all of the agencies that are members of GC. However, there are some issues with the list. Firstly, not all agencies are GC members and secondly, it is only really useful if you already know what you are looking for. You could read through all of the entries to find something that interests you, but is heavy going.



The Global Connections List of Agencies

However, I don't think that my correspondent was asking how to swim through the alphabet soup, but rather what to be looking at with regard to a particular agency. To put words into his mouth, "how can I know that an agency is trustworthy?"

I'd like to suggest a few things to look out for in answer to this question.

Have you heard of them? The fact that an agency is well known is not an infallible guide, it may just reflect the fact that they have a massive publicity budget or a very creative comms team. However, there are reasons that agencies such as OMF, WEC and other three-letter-acronyms are known in the UK scene. They have proved themselves over decades of faithful service. While this doesn't speak into the future, it's a very good place to start.

What About Theology? Most mission agency websites will include a declaration of faith or some other statement of doctrine - though you might have to dig around to find it. Usually, these are inoffensive general statements of evangelical faith and don't actually tell you much. If you want to know a little bit more about how they view specific issues, your best bet is to take a look at the agency's social media feeds, or the agency director's Twitter account. You can learn a good deal here.

What About Money? If you have the time, the energy and the expertise, there is a lot that can be learned from agency annual reports. However, I suspect that most church leaders won't have the leisure to look back over five years' worth of financial statements to work out whether an organisation is viable or not. Perhaps a better measure is to look at how transparent an organisation is about its finances. Some, but far from all, agencies include a summary of their income and outgoings on their webpage or in their magazine. The easier an agency makes to find out about its finances and the more information they provide, the easier it is to have confidence in them.

Reflection and Self-Criticism. Bear in mind, that most agency publications serve the purpose of selling the agency. To put it crudely, they are designed to separate you from your money and your people and to get you praying. However, in a rapidly changing world, agencies should show some signs of reflection on their role and their place in the world and they should be willing to look at their past actions in a critical fashion. Avoid agencies which have a canned, unvarying answer that claims to solve all problems.

Are they partner-friendly? Mission is a complex business and agencies can't do the work on their own. They need partners on the field and they have to partner with churches in the UK. Agencies all talk about partnership, but it is important to dig a down beyond the rhetoric to try and get to the reality. When an agency talks to a church in the UK, are they interested in the vision and concerns of the church or are they simply interested in selling their own vision? When they talk about overseas partners on the web or in their magazines, do they allow those partners to speak for themselves or do they use their partners as a vehicle to tell the agency's story?

Where does God fit in? It's probably worth looking at how the agency compares their role to that of the Almighty in accomplishing what (after all) is his mission.

I realise that most of these issues are questions of opinion or attitude. It would be nice to give a checklist of easily identifiable facts that people could look up for any agency. However, this isn't always as simple as it might be. There is no reliable way, across a number of agencies, of ascertaining what percentage of income is spent on home-office administration for example. However, in the long-run, it is issues such as partnership and the ability to be reflective which will determine the future fruitfulness of an agency, not its balance sheet.

One final thought; what sources of information could a church-leader use to get an impression of how an agency is doing? Magazines, websites and Facebook pages are a good start. However, I find the best source of information is to follow the agency and its CEO on Twitter. This tends to give a less curated and spun impression of what the agency is doing and thinking. However, the best

source of information is talking face to face with representatives (especially the leadership) of an agency. If they are not willing to meet, or if (when you do meet) they aren't willing to listen to you, it tells you all you need to know about the agency, while a good genuine discussion is incredibly mutually beneficial.