# MISSION AGENCIES AFTER CORONAVIRUS

*Posted on April 27, 2020 by Eddie*

The challenge that agencies face is to discern how Jesus is building his global church in this new world and to understand how their unique organisations fit into what he is doing. The danger is that they will work hard to maintain traditional structures and ways of doing things and miss out on what the Lord is doing.
**Category:** Observations

Recently, my friend Peter Rowan, the co-director of OMF in the UK, posted an excellent series of tweets on some of the impacts of covid-19 on world mission. You can see the original tweet below and then I'll post the whole thread as a quote with a little bit of reformatting to draw out what Peter says more clearly.

https://twitter.com/ptrrowan/status/1252592723053498368

> *Five potential missional consequences of COVID-19 (from a colleague in Asia) All 5 are an acceleration of trends already being feltâ€¦*
>
> *1.* ***A shift away*** *from Western-led mission, as funding bases derived from Western-based economies are undermined by the economic collapse @OMF_UK*
>
> *2.* ***Renewed emphasis*** *on local approaches to mission, Benedictine models of mission, emphasizing stability and locatedness within a community framework, are likely to re-emerge. This represents a huge challenge to current models of global organizations which exist around modern management structures. This potentially calls for more embedded, long-term, incarnational approaches, rather than â€˜hit and runâ€™ short term, project style mission*
>
> *3.* ***A challenge from religious extremism****, xenophobia and anti-immigration movements. In all likelihood, religious extremist groups will ally with nationalist movements to influence the political arrangements in states where the economic impact has been pronounced. This is likely to result in greater restrictions on mission in many contexts. Arguably, the greater threat may come from extremism within Christian communities, linked to ethnic supremacy movements*
>
> *4.* ***A need for mission to be more integrated*** *with social and economic concerns, and at heart, to be able to respond to the uncertainty around what it now means to be human. This not only demands a new practice of mission, but a renewed and revised theology of integral mission. A core question may well be: what does our mission have to do with rebuilding societies, economies, and emotional resilience in the current era? If so, what kind of theological, intellectual and technical resources will be needed to engage in communities who are suffering?*
>
> *5.* ***An urge to retreat*** *into traditionalism, sectarianism and, essentially, the past. There's a danger of turning mission activity into some kind of â€˜heritage industryâ€™, creating or maintaining a kind of familiar haven in which to shelter from the realities of the world around us.*

> *Peter Rowan on Twitter*

As with any predictions about the future, these need to be treated with a degree of caution. Only time will tell if they are truly accurate. However, my own intuition is that they are likely to turn out to be pretty accurate.

I'd like to add some observations of my own which will play into some of what Peter has written.

The most important thing to highlight is the fact that Christ will build his church; nothing can or will stop this. God's mission will go on. However, we must not confuse God's mission with the human structures that have been developed to support it. While the church will continue and will grow, there is no promise that mission agencies will do the same.

With that thought in mind, I'd like to back up and take a big picture view of the way in which the world seems to be developing. The issues that I raise are not caused by the covid-19 outbreak, they are part of a long process; however, they are being hastened by the current situation.

We are in the midst of the development of a new political/economic world order. We were already seeing the slow eclipse of the post-war, north-Atlantic system which was dominated by Europe and North-America and sustained by multilateral organisations such as the UN, the IMF and the World Bank. This decline will hasten as the global focus shifts to the Pacific, while Europe is increasingly sidelined.

Related to this point is the likelihood that globalisation, as we know it, will decline. The rise of sentiments such as America First and frustrations over the complexity of the international trading system (shown most obviously in the difficulty in obtaining protective equipment for medical staff) all demonstrate a pressure to return to focussing on the nation-state, rather than on international bodies. This is exacerbated by the growing tensions between the US and China as they compete for economic, cultural and ultimately military supremacy.

In the aftermath of covid-19, it seems unlikely that easy and affordable world travel will return in the near future and crossing borders is likely to become more complex with tighter visa restrictions and health passports being imposed globally.

I think these trends, which were already underway, but which are now accelerating will have a number of impacts on mission agencies, beyond those that Peter highlights above.

The first is that many international mission agencies reflect other international bodies such as the UN or the IMF in their structures. They have dispersed offices in many countries coordinating their work and they rely on reliable, affordable travel and easy access from one country to another in order to keep on functioning. Skype calls and Zoom conferences are going to continue to be the order of the day for mission agency leadership teams long after lockdown has ended. Travel costs and logistical difficulties will mean that international team meetings and large conferences will no longer be as feasible as they once were. If large agencies are to remain viable, they will need to reconsider how they coordinate their actions.

As globalisation winds down and national interests take precedence, Evangelical Christians face a big question; will we divide along national/regional lines or will we buck the trend and reflect our true multi-national, multi-lingual identity? I believe that we are at a point where deliberate evangelical-ecumenism is incredibly important. We are very good at drawing lines and at excluding others who do not sign up to our theological minutiae and we are living in a world in which we will face cultural pressures to distance ourselves from Christians around the globe. If we do not deliberately take steps to broaden our evangelical horizons, we are likely to find ourselves cut off from brothers and sisters elsewhere. I believe that this is an arena in which mission agencies are uniquely placed to serve. Helping to forge links between believers and churches in different parts of the world and demonstrating our essential unity in Christ in a situation in which our differences are being highlighted will be an essential function of agencies in the future. We must resist the temptation to take cover in our safe ethnic and theological trenches.

At the moment (April 2020), mission agencies, like other organisations, are scrabbling around trying to work out how to carry on functioning in a very different world. New patterns of working are being developed and will slowly bed in. However, agencies need to deal with the fact that we will not return to the way things used to be; we are not going back to "normal". The challenge that agencies face is to discern how Jesus is building his global church in this new world and to understand how their unique organisations fit into what he is doing. The danger is that they will work hard to maintain traditional structures and ways of doing things and miss out on what the Lord is doing.