RESPONSE, RECOVERY AND RECONSTRUCTION?

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Category: Observations

Simon Barrington of Forge Leadership Consultancy has shared a very helpful video based on his experiences in disaster relief. I'd strongly recommend that anyone involved in leading a mission agency takes the four minutes or so needed to watch the video (if you receive this via email and the video doesn't show up below, you can find it here). What I'd like to do is to build on Simon's thoughts and look at how they might be specifically applied in the mission agency world.

https://youtu.be/gO7Q1uCzguM

Response: most mission agencies are more or less through this initial phase. There was a blizzard of decisions to be made and actions to be taken as the reality of lockdown hit. For the most part, these issues were pragmatic; what needs to be done so that people can work from home? how do we process donations? who should stay on the field? who should come home? and who should decide?

Recovery: in this phase, the focus moves from the pragmatic to the pastoral and emotional. There will still be pragmatic issues to deal with as the systems that were hastily put in place during response start to creak at the edges, but as Simon highlights, fatigue and depression will become significant factors. Mission agencies face complex pastoral issues during this period. How do you care for missionaries on the field who do not know when they will be able to return home to see their families? There is also the converse situation of people who came home and now desperately want to return to their place of service, but have no idea when they will be able to. The whole uncertainty is going to weigh very heavily on people. Mission leaders who are trying to hold all of these threads together will be in need of pastoral care and support too - though they may not realise it. Adrenaline is a wonderful drug and the buzz of activity can give the illusion that everything is great, when that is far from the case. Leaders who don't do some self-care are likely to crash and burn.

Mission board members, you have two key tasks at the moment: one of those is to make sure that your agency leadership team are getting the support they need (even if they don't want it).

Reconstruction: mission agencies may be tempted to get back to business as normal as soon as possible. However, I think that they would be mistaken if they thought in these terms. The world church and mission have evolved significantly over the last few decades, and mission agencies have tended to be slow to respond to those changes. However, in the face of the current pandemic, those changes are likely to accelerate. I've highlighted some of the issues which will impact mission agencies long-term in an earlier post and you might also profit from this one by my friend Jay Matenga in New Zealand. Even if agencies want to go back to how things were, they are likely to

face finance and staffing issues that make that impossible.

The task facing mission agencies is not so much one of reconstruction but of redevelopment. We need new structures and approaches that are appropriate to the post-covid world and this will need a different sort of thinking. If the dominant approach during the response phase is pragmatic, and emotional/pastoral during recovery, the way forward for reconstruction is missiological/theological. We have to seriously think through why we do what we do and what it is that we should think and do as the world changes around us. This should be a constant theme in the life of mission agencies, anyway, but much more so now. As I put it in an earlier post:

> *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.*

The problem with this, is that in order to reconstruct/redevelop, the theological and missiological thinking has to be going on now. It is too late to start doing this in a year or eighteen months when we shift into the next phase of the crisis. I mentioned above that agency boards have two key tasks at the moment; one is caring for their leaders, the other is putting the basic thinking in place that will allow them to move forward appropriately. However, there is a real difficulty in trying to do forward missiological-thinking when we are in the middle of a crisis. However, we don't really have a choice if we are to stay relevant.

At the very least, anyone leading a mission agency at board or staff levels should read and ponder this short ebook by Jason Mandryck. Let me be blunt, if you don't read it, you aren't doing your job. It's as simple as that. It isn't perfect and there are a few things that I'd like to see added, but agency leadership and boards must read it.

If mission agencies are to survive or even thrive through this current situation, they will need to recognise where on the response-recovery-reconstruction spectrum they are and they will need to shift their type of response and mode of thinking to suit their current situation.