AGENCIES MUST LISTEN TO CHURCHES

Posted on August 18, 2020 by Eddie

It is my contention that the church in the UK needs to hear the voice of mission agencies advocating for the importance of international cross-cultural mission. However, it is also my belief that agencies are poorly positioned to make their voices heard beyond a small committed core of churches.
Category: Observations

Perhaps the most important missiological challenge facing mission agencies today is to work out the basis for their relationship to churches and denominations in the UK. There is no one size fits all answer to this question because of the differences between agencies. For example, an agency which has a sizeable evangelistic work amongst diaspora peoples in the UK is likely to have a very different relationship to churches than one whose sole function is relief and development work in the majority world.

The reason why this is so key is that mission agencies depend on churches for their existence; churches provide recruits, finance and prayer support and without these things agencies simply could not function. However, In many, if not most, cases, the relationship between churches and agencies is dysfunctional. This is not to say that there are no examples of good partnerships between churches and agencies. There are many cases where agencies and churches work well together in mutually supportive relationships. However, from my research, these good partnerships are the exception and not the rule.

In my experience, churches and agencies tend to view their relationship very differently. Agencies will generally say that they have excellent partnerships with churches and that things are very positive. Churches, on the other hand, are much less likely to be happy with their relationship with mission agencies. When talking with church leaders about agencies, a number of similar themes emerge which agency boards need to take into account.

- **Churches feel overwhelmed**. Church leaders and mission committee members receive huge amounts of literature, phone calls and requests for speaking slots from different mission agencies. There are over 100 different agencies in the UK, many of them contacting churches on a regular basis asking for support. Even when churches have a good mutually beneficial relationship with one agency, they will still need to fend off other agencies who are asking for their attention. This does not endear the agency sector as a whole to many churches.
- **Confusion brings alienation**. The increasing number of agencies and the multitude of British based Christian para-church organisations mean that mean that church leaders are unlikely to have a deep relationship with any particular agency or organisation. Increasingly church leaders are unlikely to have anything more than a passing familiarity with what one pastor described as the â€œalphabet soup of mission agenciesâ€ . Agencies can no longer assume that churches and their leaders know what they do or where they do it.
- **Churches increasingly do not need agencies**. Whether for pragmatic or theological reasons, many churches and church streams are rejecting the model of sending missionaries in partnership with mission agencies in favour of sending them directly through their own structures. In addition, the rapid increase in the number of mission agencies in the UK seems to

be at least partly due to churches creating their own agencies because the existing ones do not meet their particular needs.

- **Cross-Cultural mission has changed**. Many churches have a keen interest and involvement in global mission, but this finds its expression entirely within the UK. Working with refugee and diaspora communities or overseas students provides churches with ample opportunities to reach unreached people with the gospel without actually sending missionaries overseas. Churches may feel a need for some agency support in this work, but itâ€™s also true that they may not.
- **Generations are changing.** The rising millennial generation tends to be committed to racial and social equality, place a high value on economic and political justice and be very concerned about issues such as climate change. This is not to say that they are not committed to the proclamation of the Christian message, but rather that they expect to see the gospel worked out in very concrete ways. These emphases can be uncomfortable to some mission agencies. Another issue with millennials is there attitude to long-term commitment. Taking a negative approach, it may appear that many millennials are reluctant or slow to commit themselves long-term to a cause. A more positive view of this is that they tend to take a wide range of interests and are willing to be flexible in the way that they support causes and organisations. Given that millennials will form the majority of the church in the not-too-distant future, agencies need to consider the impact of these trends on their work.
- **Churches want relationships, not systems**. When churches send missionaries with an agency, they want to have an ongoing relationship with the missionary and to have input into their work and into any major decisions that they make. This can be uncomfortable for mission agencies who find that they are unable to make decisions about their staff without reference to a third party.

The context of the church in the UK is changing rapidly. The decline in church attendance among the British population and the increase in communities from overseas means that increasingly their focus is on mission to their local communities, rather than overseas. Even when they are involved in overseas, cross-cultural mission their understanding and expectations of mission agencies are likely to be very different from a previous generation. Agencies, with their experience and expertise in cross-cultural work, may still have an important role to play in this emerging context. However, it is incumbent on agencies to adapt to changes in the way that the church operates, not the other way round. Structures for mission have evolved over the centuries and they will need to continue to do so.Â

The changes that the agencies are required to make may only be minor or they may be more significant. However, any changes should be made on the basis of a reflective process which evaluates the agencyâ€™s relationship to the church in the current situation, rather than simply

pragmatic changes which allow it to continue doing what it has always done. Key in this process is listening to representative voices from the church in the UK. It is not unusual for pastors or church leaders to sit on agency boards, however, it is important to realise the fact that they are committed enough to an agency to give up significant time to serve as a board member means they are not representative of the majority of churches who have no agency links. In order to consider the agencyâ€™s relationship to churches, it is important to listen to the voices of church leaders who have no involvement with mission agencies, or who might even be hostile to the concept. Input from friendly, committed voices is not enough. The biggest mistake that agencies can make in this area is to be complacent and to assume that because they have a number of good partnerships that they do not need to address their relationship to the church in the UK.

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This post is a follow up to the one from a few days ago when I discussed the international voices that agencies need to listen to. This is all part of a short book(let) that I am drawing together for mission agency board members.