CHURCHES AND AGENCIES A MANIFESTO

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A few thoughts...
Category: Observations

These are a few semi-random thoughts that I may develop into something more substantial over time. Basically, I'd like to explore some of the ways that local churches and mission agencies should interact when it comes to sending missionaries.

Without seeking to justify them scripturally or theologically at this point (I may do so later), I think that there are two broad principles that should guide the process.

Churches are primarily responsible for the care, well being and spiritual health of their members (including any missionaries they send).

Agencies are primarily responsible to ensure that missionaries are equipped and supported for whatever role it is that they are doing.

I know these need some unpacking, but let's roll with them for now. At this point, I'd highlight the word primarily in both principles. There is some degree of overlap between the role of the agency and the role of the church and because of this, decisions should be made in dialogue. So how do these things work out in practice? Let's look at three situations.

Recruitment: It is the church's responsibility to identify those people who should be set apart for full-time Christian service; this includes those who will go into pastoral work and also those who will get involved in cross-cultural mission. It is the agency's role to select and equip people to work in the specific ministries that it is involved in.

Ideally, the first step in the process should be the church setting apart people for ministry. The potential missionaries, in consultation with their church leadership, should then approach various agencies to see where and how the church wants to be involved. This involves churches being more proactive in the process than they generally are today.

Work Assignment: The agency is responsible for the work that the missionary does on the field. Obviously, their assignment will have been the subject of detailed discussion in advance and the church should be consulted about any significant changes in what the missionary does. However, the reality of missionary life is that sometimes decisions have to be made quickly and churches should allow agencies some flexibility in what their missionaries do. For example, if someone falls ill, it may be necessary for a missionary to leave their normal work role to fill in the role that has been vacated.

When Things Go Wrong: While one doesn't want to think about it, missionaries don't always behave as one might wish them to and there are times when discipline is required. These situations are horribly complex and it is best for all parties concerned if some sort of protocol is in place beforehand. It is the church, who is primarily responsible for the spiritual life of their member and they are the ones who are responsible for discipline and any eventual restitution. However, the agency are heavily implicated. It could be that they cannot cope with a toxic individual on the field and that they need to send them home as soon as possible (it happens). Equally, it could be that the agency has specialist counselling and support services on the field which are able to handle the needs of the missionary better than their home church.

These are just some initial thoughts...