WHEN SHOULD YOU START A MISSION AGENCY?

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Category: Observations

Last week, I reposted something I wrote on reasons to close your mission agency. Not unreasonably, a commentator asked:

> *In follow up, is the alternative question When should a new mission agency be established?*

This post is an attempt to provide some answers to this question; though it can hardly claim to be definitive.

The first point to make is that there are already too many mission agencies in the UK. For most church leaders, the bewildering array of different organisations clamouring for their time and attention is overwhelming. Anecdotally, the profusion of agencies discourages involvement in mission rather than encourages it. So while I would not definitively say that it would be wrong to set up a new agency, I would say that the reasons for doing so need to be very, very strong.

Following up on this, I would argue that the local church needs to be at the centre of any mission enterprise. Two things flow from this.

- A mission agency should only be in order to do something that a local church or association of churches is unable to do themselves.
- Any new agency should intentionally, from the ground up, be designed to support local churches and associations in their cross-cultural mission work.

From my point of view, these are the two basic criteria which must be met before a new agency is founded. However, there are a few other issues that need to be considered.

The besetting sin of evangelicalism is our tendency to split and form new churches, groups, denominations and organisations. However, Scripture clearly teaches that unity should be a high value to us. Jesus high priestly prayer in John 17 links ties mission and unity together in the strongest of terms. Because of this, I would counsel anyone who was considering founding a new agency, to consider whether or not they could work in some sort of partnership with an agency that already exists. While this might impose some limitations or complications initially, the model of working in unity and cooperation is to be preferred over further splintering of the mission movement.

One of the comments reasons for founding new mission agencies is to create an administrative vehicle for the work of a particular individual or couple. The principle problem with this is that many of these small "one-family" agencies are working in similar places doing similar things. Rather than continually spin off new agencies, we would do well to consider where consolidation might be an option. That being said, I can see why a church might want to set up a charitable vehicle to facilitate the work of a member, who is working at a distance from the church itself. However, if an individual or family are setting up an agency because they have no direct church link there are some fundamental problems that should be addressed.

Another reason for establishing agencies occurs when an established agency wants to give profile to a particular ministry by spinning it off as a separate charity. While there may be organisational advantages to this and it can have real strengths in terms of marketing and branding. I would argue that adding to the already overloaded mission agency scene in the UK is not a good move for the church as a whole, even if it helps the individual agency.

Ultimately, I think the question of when a new agency should be founded is a theological one which involves our understanding of mission. Three years ago, I wrote a post entitled "What if Agencies Took the *missio Dei* seriously. While this doesn't address the issue of creating new agencies, the principles it raises are relevant, so I'm going to take the liberty of posting it below.

Missio Dei or â€˜The Mission of Godâ€™ is a trendy term that you will find cropping up with increasing regularity in evangelical books about mission. Iâ€™ve posted about it on numerous occasions and you can find a list of these posts here. Despite the increasing popularity of the term it is a complex concept which is rarely unpacked as it deserves (see this post for more detail).

However, though one can find references to theÂ *missio Dei* scattered through the mission literature, it seems to be little more than a buzz word and has little impact on the way that people actually go about doing mission.

In order to push this thought forward, Iâ€™m going to ignore my own advice and adopt a simplistic definition of *missio Dei.* I realise that much more could and should be said, but Iâ€™m trying to keep this blog post down to around 500 words (I failed).

A traditional view of mission is that God delegates the task of mission to the church. The *missio*

Dei view of mission is that the Triune God has a mission and that he calls the church to participate in that mission with him. The difference is subtle, but extremely important and in my view it has huge implications for the way in which we talk about mission and involve people in it.

It changes how we do recruitment. Rather than calling (guilt-tripping) people to come and do a task which wouldnâ€™t get done without them, we would be inviting people to join with what God is doing around the world. We can be certain that Christ is building his church and that God is reconciling all things to himself in Christ and it is an amazing privilege that God allows people like us to be involved as part of this process. We would also give much more prominence to the communities which God has placed people in. Rather than recruiting individuals and then working out how to get their church and other supporters on board, agencies would help churches to identify, train and send their members.

It changes how we raise funds. Iâ€™ve attended enough fund raising workshops and training sessions to be aware of some of the jargon. It is important (especially with major donors â€“ jargon for rich people) to let them know that their money is achieving something. Major donors like to know that their money is being spent well and want to see results. If you look at the fundraising pages of some agencies, you will find stories and videos from donors telling how their gift transformed the lives of some people somewhere and inviting you to do the same. Now, without wishing to decry the generosity of donors (major, or widows with mites), money doesnâ€™t transform the lives of people â€“ God does. If we are serious about the *missio Dei*, we will be honest that we canâ€™t promise results when people give money. The Spirit blows where he will and God will use our generosity in the way that he sees fit.

This isnâ€™t saying that funds shouldnâ€™t be well accounted for and wisely used, not at all â€“ there are all sorts of reasons why we have to give good account of how money is spent. However, the Christian call is to be cheerful, generous givers and that means not expecting or demanding a return or impact.

Missio Dei changes how agencies work together. Mission agencies will say that they donâ€™t compete, but they all produce their own magazines, have their own branding, Twitter feeds, Facebook pages and what-have-yous. To the outsider, it certainly looks like competition. It is true that behind the publicity machine there is a good deal of cooperation in some areas â€“ especially when it comes to working together on the field. However, if we were serious about the idea that mission is Godâ€™s activity and not ours, we would be much less precious about organisational boundaries. I am convinced that many agencies in the UK could and should merge, creating stronger and more viable entities.

If you go to a mission festival of some sort, there will typically be a zone in which the various agencies display their wares. There will be lots of brightly coloured stands, each one more eye-catching and technologically complex than the next. Friendly agency reps stand around, like Moroccan carpet salesmen trying to entice you into their shops, attempting to interest you in the work that they are doing. If we took the *missio Dei* seriously, I think we would rethink these sorts of things entirely. Rather than agencies trying get people interested in them, there would be a team of people listening to the punters (and their churches), seeing what they are interested in and pointing them in the right direction. You wouldnâ€™t actually need stands from individual agencies at all â€“ which would save a good deal of money. With a bit of creativity, the zone could still be attractive and inspiring, but it could also send a very different message to the one you get today.

Of course, none of these ideas will be adopted, they are just not practical. However, this then raises the important question of what should drive us in our mission; what we find to be practical, or what we believe about God and the way he is at work? If we are serious about theÂ *missio Dei*Â then mission-as-usual is not an option.