CAUGHT IN THE CROSSFIRE

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Running a mission agency which is working overseas is becoming an increasingly complex job. The rules and regulations concerning visas, money-laundering and such like are a massive headache.
Category: Observations

I don't know if you have noticed, but Britain's relationship with the rest of the world has been getting a lot more complex of late.Â Whether it is concerns about Isis in the Middle East, Russia in Europe or the number of people from other countries coming to live in the UK, there is an awful lot of talk about our relationship to other parts of the world. In this post, I'm not so much interested in these issues themselves, but in the way in which the government's response to them has an effect on my little corner of the world; mission agencies.

Over the last few years we've heard a fair bit about the way in which the authorities are addressing money laundering and schemes for funding terrorists abroad. What you've probably not heard, is that this has the capacity for being a major headache for mission agencies. Take a group like Wycliffe; every month well meaning Christians across the UK give money which is then distributed to Bible translators, support workers and the like in countries across the world. It's all very innocent and worthy, but from the government's point of view, it looks rather dodgy. Lots of individuals giving money which ends up in the hands of people all around the world - some of them in countries with a very dubious reputation! So, each year in the annual audit, Wycliffe have to prove that money given by supporters in the UK is actually received by the person or project that they say they are donating to. It's not a difficult task, but it is time consuming and it leaves the people involved feeling as though they are being accused of something nefarious. It's all very uncomfortable.

Another thing that the government have done is to address the immigration issue by cutting down on 'bogus colleges'. They are very keen to point out that we have a world class university system in the UK and to encourage legitimate students; but bogus colleges are bad news. Once again, there is a problem with definition. There are a lot of good, long-standing Christian education organisations in the UK who have a history of training students from around the world. These are now faced with proving - on a regular basis - that they are legitimate institutions, not bogus colleges. For small institutions, often running on a shoestring, this extra overhead and the threat of loosing their visa status is a massive problem.

The mention of visas brings us to another issue; in an effort to restrict immigration, the government has tightened up the legislation regarding the allocation of visas for people coming to work in the UK. Not surprisingly, mission agencies, which often have a lot of international staff have been caught in the middle of this and there has been at least one high profileÂ case that hit the headlines. The problem here is that mission agencies are typically low-budget organisations who can't afford the expensive legal help which is needed to keep up to date with the ever shifting sands of government visa regulations. I know at first hand that mission staff work really hard to keep up to date, supported by Global Connections, but if you don't have the resources of IBM or Google, it is next to impossible.

The latest in this series of issues is tied to the government's clamp-down on expats having access to NHS services inEngland.Â Basically, people comingÂ back to the UK after living abroad do not have an automatic right to NHS treatment. Up till this point, missionaries have enjoyed an exemption from

this rule, but that is no longer the case.Â This isn't because the government have targeted missionaries, in fact they have been very attentive to the concerns raised by the missionary community. It is simply part of a wholesale regularising of the rules for everyone who lives abroad.

Just a few thoughts in closing. It is all too easy to fall into the rhetoric of persecution. I have heard people use each of these issues as evidence that the state is persecuting Christians. I'm sorry, you'll need to look elsewhere for that evidence. In each of these cases, the legislation and its impact is far wider than the Christian or mission world. We just got caught in the cross-fire of the political struggle regarding Britain's place in the world. Using the language of persecution in these sorts of case actually weakens our position in the face of real persecution.

Running a mission agency which is working overseas is becoming an increasingly complex job. The rules and regulations concerning visas, money-laundering and such like are a massive headache. The proliferation of small Christian charities, all of whom have to understand and follow the guidelines is making life more difficult. It is almost impossible for the bigger agencies to stay up to date, much less the smaller ones that are springing up all over the place. I don't think we can afford the current level of diversity in the Christian sector if we are to continue to act legally.

I don't think that the issues I have raised here have anything to do with the government persecuting Christians.Â However, I do think that they point to something that should be of concern to all believers; the way in which we relate to other nations and welcome strangers into our country. We will have different views and ideas on this subject; but as people whose primary citizenship is in heaven, not the UK, we can't ignore these questions.