MISSION AGENCIES 2050

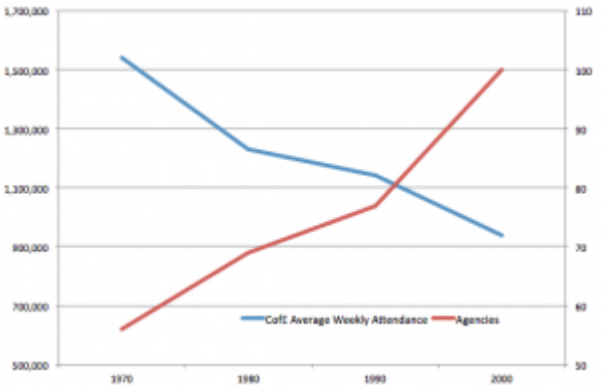
Posted on April 9, 2015 by Eddie

It isn't rocket science to suggest that the number of mission agencies based in the UK will decline precipitously over the next 35 years. I may sound pessimistic, but I believe that we cannot avoid a crisis among British mission agencies, however, with good leadership and planning we can avoid a hard landing.

Category: Observations

In this post, I will attempt to make some predictions about the state of British based mission agencies in the year 2050. This is a follow up to my posts on the UK Church and the World Church in the year 2050.

This graph of trends over the few decades of the twentieth century is a useful starting place.



The blue line shows the average attendance at Church of England churches for the period 1970-2001 (figures from here), which we can assume to be more or less representative of church attendance as a whole, in the absence of other data. The red line is the number of mission agencies in the UK during the same time period (this only covers agencies which are members of Global Connections and so is an underestimate, if anything).

One might wish to argue with the exact figures, but the trends are clear; as church attendance declines, the number of mission agencies in the UK increases. There are more and more agencies seeking support from a shrinking constituency.Â This is not sustainable even in the short to mid-term, much less by 2050.

In addition,Â the trends that were addressed in the earlier two posts in this blog series, namely the shift in the centre of gravity from historic Christendom to the rest of the world, raise questions about role of agencies themselves. It is no wonder that David Smith has written:

> *â€œWhat is clear by now is that both the concept of mission as a one-way movement from Christendom to the un-evangelised world, and the structures devised at the close of the eighteenth century to facilitate that movement, have been overtaken by a historical developments that render them increasingly irrelevant and redundant.â€ (Mission After ChristendomÂ p.116)*

It isn't rocket science to suggest that the number of mission agencies based in the UK will decline precipitously over the next 35 years. I suggest that there are three types of agency which will survive.

- International agencies who have a significant proportion of their leadership and structure based outside of the UK. Agencies like this will continue to exist, but they may have a very reduced presence in the UK.
- Small agencies who basically exist to support the ministry of one person or a couple. These sorts of agencies, rooted in a church or a group of friends, will continue to spring up in the future.
- Large relief and development agencies; however, I suspect that the pressures on them will be such that they will lose their Evangelical distinctives and will increasingly resemble Oxfam, Save the Children or other aid agencies.

In a comment on an earlier post, I was asked what we could do to avoid the decline in the church that I predicted. I don't have an answer, so I didn't give one. However, I do think that there are steps that the leadership of agencies need to take to adapt to the future.

- We need to address the issue of fragmentation. There are far too many agencies all doing similar things and all competing for resources from the same group of people. We need visionary leaders (at board level) who will reduce the number of agencies either through merger or closure.
- Agencies need to look to supporting and encouraging Christians in other parts of the world, rather than just sending missionaries from the UK. This will entail a major programme to re-educate the British mission supporting public on the new realities of the Christian world.
- Above everything else, mission leadership and boards need toÂ take serious stock of their situation and the future trends. We cannot assume that theÂ *status quo* will continue, much less can we live in the glory days of the past. Even those agencies which are doing well at the current time will face resourcing problems in the next 10-15 years.

I may sound pessimistic, but I believe that we cannot avoid a crisis among British mission agencies, however, with good leadership and planningÂ we can avoid a hard landing.