THERE ARE TOO MANY MISSION AGENCIES

Posted on August 18, 2015 by Eddie

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€
Categories: Mission, Observations

A week or so ago, I posted five questions that I suggested weÂ would rather not answer. One of those concerned whether or not there were too many mission agencies.

Justin Long, helpfully answered my questions and here is his answer on this one:

> *I say â€œmaybe not.â€ Here are my reasons:*
> *a) falling attendance in the mainline church doesnâ€™t necessarily correlate to shrinking interest in and support for mission agencies. I wonder. AreÂ the people attending the C o E the most likely to support mission agencies?*
> *b) there are a LOT of places in the world that needs workers, and agencies generally can only field so many. There can only be so many agencies sized 1,000 and above; a lot of agencies have just a few hundred or even a few dozen workers. My district survey is not yet complete, and I already have over 14,000 specific places that would require at least one strategy team, and many more than that. Iâ€™m not saying all of these should come from a Western agency, but I suspect 150 agencies X 10 workers each (=1,500 workers) is too low. They may overlap in interest without overlapping in places.*
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> *In any event, my thinking is: agencies inevitably have to compete for resources. I know, competition brings about some bad things, like two agencies neither of which get enough but if one were out of the picture the other might be fully funded. Competition also sharpens our abilities to communicate and our focus on our partners. Iâ€™m not sure how that might be changed, or even if it should, but I know we have to grapple with it.*

Without wishing being too subtle, Justin is wrong on this. Let me take his points one at a time.

- There is both a drop in church attendance across the board in the UK, with the exception being black-majority churches in the big cities. I only used CofE figures because they are the easiest to get hold of without paying. However, the impression that I (and those I talk to in the field) have is that interest in overseas mission is declining even faster than church numbers. It's hard to be quantitative about this, but the anecdotal evidence is strong (take this example). We have fewer Christians supporting an increasing number of agencies - it doesn't add up.
- There are lots of places where the Gospel has yet to reach; butÂ this doesn't mean that western mission agencies should be the ones to reach them. There is a huge amount that needs to be unpacked here, which I can't do in a short blog post, but if you want an idea of the future of mission read this and for more on mission agencies, try this.
- The benefits of competition. Justin writes: "Competition also sharpens our abilities to communicate and our focus on our partners." This may be true, but my concern is that in their rush to communicate better and to raise support from a shrinking pool, some agencies are placing slick communication and good fund-raising technique above integrity.Â How many agencies report honestly about failure and making-mistakes? Not enough of them! One of the

things that really bothers me is that organisations which collaborate well on the field, sometimes don't acknowledge that at home but actually end up competing.

In the end, I reckon that there are four reasons why there are too many agencies; I'll mention them briefly without unpacking them in detail.

- The numbers aren't sustainable. The UK church cannot support all of the agencies which exist currently and some of them will end up folding. Unfortunately, the organisations which survive may not be the most useful, most important or the most effective.
- The multiplicity of agencies does no favours to the mission movement. I regularly hear from church leaders that they are frustrated by the volume of literature, email and other publicity that they receive from a variety of agencies, much of it saying very similar things. "Why can't you guys get your act together?" is something I hear all too often. This blizzard of communication actually discourages churches rather than encouraging them to be involved in mission.
- The role of the agencies is to support the church in its mission, not to do the mission for the church and you don't need hundreds of agencies to do this. I realise that there are still those who hang on to Ralph Winter'sÂ *modality/sodality* view of agencies and the church, but the theological tide is flowing strongly against it (see yesterday's post and Paul Davies comment thereon).
- The multitude of agencies is a denial of the Gospel. The besetting sin of evangelicalism is division, but the clear message of Scripture is that the unity of the Church is a sign of the truth of our message (read John 17). Multiple agencies all doing their own thing may seem to make strategic sense, but only if you view it through the lens of Enlightenment pragmatism. In the light of Scripture, it is a big mistake.

There is a place for mission agencies; of that I'm convinced (I've spent 30 years working in one!). However, there are both theological and practical reasons why we need to address the multiplicity of agencies. The British church simply cannot support the number of organisations that exist at the moment, things may well be otherwise in the US, where Justin is based. However, even if we could support the growing number of agencies, there are good theological reasons why we should not do so.

So what should we do about it?

- Well, I'll keep banging on about it on my blog. Hopefully, someone will listen.
- Mission leaders and especially mission boards need to take this subject seriously. If they are not convinced by my theology, then the pragmatics must still be an issue.
- Church leaders who care about the role of the UK in overseas mission need to put pressure on mission agencies to get their acts together. This is too important to remain silent about.

Closing thoughts: this post has been too long already. It may seem that I am being Cassandra like, wailing "woe is me" into the ether. However, I'm actually very positive about the future of God's mission. Mission agencies as we know them have only been a feature of the Church for a little over 200 years - less that 10% of our history. God is endlessly creative and he is already finding new ways to reach out into the bits of the world that we find difficult. May he give us eyes to see what he is doing and willing hearts to join him.

A final, final thought - I'm sure I've posted this quote from David Smith before:

> *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€*