A NEW WAY TO LOOK AT THINGS?

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About twenty years ago, there was a fad for books with hiddenÂ 3D pictures. The pages showed abstract coloured patterns, but if you stared at it long enough, screwed your face up, closed one eye, then the other, took your glasses off and put them back on again, the picture would eventually resolve into something that looked like a 3D horse (you can see some examples, here).

In conversation with a church leader, yesterday, I had a moment which was a bit like that.

We were talking about two overlapping problems; the number of people who are going into missionary work without any agency support and the number of small agencies which are cropping up all over the UK. There are a number of reasons why I refer to these as problems. Firstly, long established agencies provide a significant amount of experience and expertise in cross cultural mission; sidelining these groups means that people are doomed to repeat the mistakes that agencies made 50 or 100 years ago.

Secondly, established agencies provide a degree of administrative and logistical support to mission work that is hard to duplicate. On a simple, everyday issue, economies of scale mean that larger agencies are able to transfer funds internationally at advantageous rates; this can make a big difference when you are in rural Africa and relying on funds from the UK. In an increasingly dangerous world, most large agencies have trained crisis response teams and hostage negotiators; individuals working on their own have none of this backup.

Finally, these new agencies and individual efforts are confusing for people who support mission and can end up replicating things that others are already doing. Given that the number of mission agencies in the UK is unsustainable, the last thing we need is even more of them.

So we have a problem; too many people are going off and doing their own thing without benefitting from the work of those who have gone before them.

It was then I had my eureka moment, when a church leader said that the mission agencies simply aren't catching the spark for overseas mission in people's lives.

In other words, the question is turned round. I have been asking one question; "why are people going off and doing their own thing?" When I should, perhaps, have been asking another; "why aren't mission agencies meeting the needs and enthusiasms of the church?".

I find that reframing the issue like this provides a really helpful insight into the issue and also places a huge challenge at the door of the larger mission agencies. I would encourage agency leadership to spend some time looking at their programmes from this viewpoint.

Of course, these issues are complex and there are truths on both sides of the equation, but sometimes we need to see the hidden 3D image if we are to make progress.