BUILDING AGENCIES FROM THE GROUND UP

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A hypothetical scenario which looks at how an agency might change if it reflected on what God is doing across the world.
Category: Observations

Over the last couple of days, I've written posts about the way in which mission agencies are structured. The first one was a response to a very good paper from New Zealand (which I more or less agreed with). In yesterday's post, I suggested that agencies need to reflect on what God is doing across the world, before developing their organisational structures or strategies. This caused some good discussion and if you haven't read the comments on that post, now would be a good time to do so.

What I didn't do, yesterday was suggest ways in which reflecting on the way God is working today should impact agencies in practical terms. What I'd like to do today is to look at a hypothetical British organisation which makes financial grants to support Christian ministry in Africa. We don't need to be any more specific than that for the purposes of this exercise.

So what do we see happening in the world today that could impact an organisation like this?

Firstly, the gap between rich and poor is growing and this is partly because of the way that Western nations have profited from their dealings with the poorer parts of the world. It is right and proper that Christians in the West should share their relative riches with their brothers and sisters in Africa.

Secondly, the church in Africa is growing and maturing. It is no longer appropriate (if it ever was) for Western Churches and Agencies to treat African churches and leaders as being in some way less mature or capable than themselves.

Thirdly, the history of Western involvement in Africa has been typified by colonialism and various forms of injustice. Even in the Christian world, missionaries tend to be far richer than their national colleagues and he who paysÂ the piper...

Against this background, it might well be that a funding agency in the UK could decide that they want to treat their colleagues in Africa with a huge degree of dignity and respect. In a reaction against the errors of the past, they no longer wish to force their agenda on the church in Africa and so want to give grants their grants without strings attached. The African churches are free to use the money from the UK for whichever projects they see as important, rather than having to use it as directed by the donors. This would be a powerful, symbolic, overturning of the normal way of working.

However, at the end of the year, the UK agency has to report on its work and it has to be able to show that the money that it has disbursed has been used in accordance with the wishes of the donors in the UK. So if people gave money to build a church, the agency has to be able to report that a church was built. So, they ask their African partners to send in a report about the new church building. So, although the money was ostensibly given without strings, the African church had to build a new building, whether they wanted to or not. They were free to use the money as they see fit, as long as they did what the donors wanted!Â Â The charitable status of the agency in the UK means that money can't easily be given without strings attached.

So, the agency leadership and trustees sit down and prayerfully consider what they should do. They believe that their principles of giving money without condition is an important response to the situation they find themselves in today; but these principles are incompatible with charity law. The response is easy; they de-register as a charity. This means that they have to deal with far less red-tape and they are able to make the grants according to their principles. Of course, it also means that they have significantly less money to give, because they lose out on gift aid and various other benefits that come to charities. However, from their point of view, it is better to have less money and to use it well, than to be far richer and hemmed in by rules that restrict their vision.

OK, I know that this example is over-simplified and I'm not, for one second, suggesting that this is what agencies and grant making bodies should do. However, it is an illustration of how thinking through the implications of what God is doing in the world could impact our practice, which in turn should shape our structures. The problem is that we tend to jump straight to the practice and structure level without taking the bigger, global, picture into consideration.

If this theoretical stuff about agencies and structures is getting boring, don't worry. There is a fascinating post about Bible translation coming up tomorrow.