MISSION AGENCIES: QUESTIONS

Posted on September 23, 2016 by Eddie

Various thoughts on a number of issues all raised by an excellent blog post.
Category: Observations

Over the next few days, I'm going to interact with an excellent blog post by Neil Brighton, provocatively entitled, Mission Agencies: Do We Need Them. Please take a few minutes to read it (and then come back here). At the start of post NeilÂ raises three nagging worries:

> *The first is theological. Mission is about us (the church) joining in with the mission of God. Going and sending so that others might become disciples of Jesus and be gathered in church communities. There are many dimensions to this but ecclesiology matters and is an integral part of this. My concern is that pan evangelical agencies downplay ecclesiology (because it divides evangelicals) which ultimately harms the mission of God.*

> *The second is the viability of organisations with decreasing numbers of long (5 years plus) and mid-term (1-5 years) term missionaries, an ageing supporter base and a financial reliance on legacies.*

> *The third is whether mission agencies are able to help us face the challenges of tomorrow rather than give us the solutions of yesterday.*

I have a bit of a problem interacting with what Neil says here because I agree with it all.

Let's take them one by one:

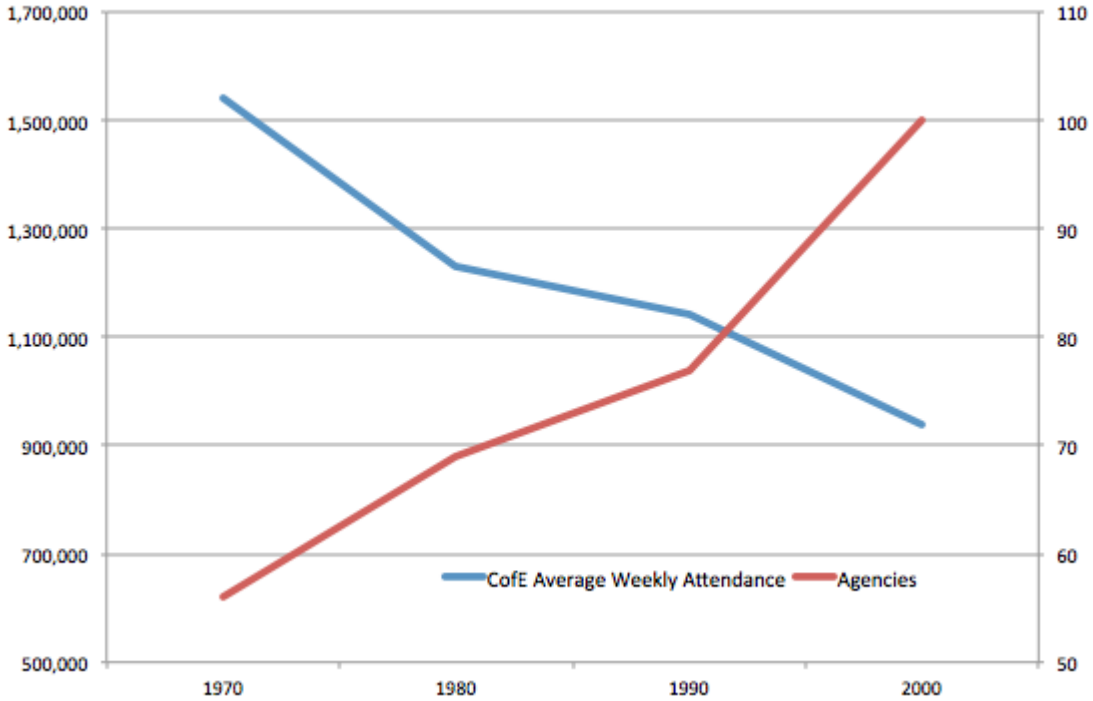
Neil is dead right, many (most?) mission agencies do downplay ecclesiology. The very notion of a separate structure for mission apart from the local church is difficult to justify from Scripture (seeÂ Early Christian Mission, Volume Two: Paul & the Early ChurchÂ which comprehensively debunks the idea). This is not to say that there is not a pragmatic role for agencies; but it does mean that the purpose of agencies is to serve the local church in mission. I would highlight two areas in particular in which this low ecclesiology is manifest. Firstly, someÂ agencies insist that they are going to do evangelism in their way, to meet targets which they have defined whether the local church wants them to or not. No doubt this sort of attitude is well intentioned, but it shows both cultural arrogance and a lack of respect for the local church. Our attitude to mission is right!

The second issue is arises in the 'home country', I wrote this a while ago:

> - *Relationships and accountability become complex. When a missionary is supported by a multitude of people and churches, the notion of a â€œsending churchâ€ to whom they are accountable becomes blurred. As someone with a strong belief in the role of the sending or commissioning church, I find this very problematic.*

The issue of church-agency relationships was a recurring theme at this year's Global Connections' Conference.

Neil's point about the viability of agencies is well made. I have similar points in the past, notably in this post, which contains this startling graph.



Neil's last point about whether agencies are equipped to help us solve yesterday's problems rather than today's is also an important one. There is no doubt that, to some extent, he is highlighting a real problem. I illustrated one aspect of this problem in a recent post.Â However, that isn't the whole story:

- There are some agencies which are adapting to the changing world and who are getting to grips with the problems of tomorrow. Change comes slowly, but it is coming in some places.
- As the graph above illustrates, there are new mission structures being created all of the time. Some of these are little more than modern incarnations of traditional agency models, but others are new and innovative, reflecting the world of today. I wrote about thisÂ here.
- However, we still have a problem. The current situation is unsustainable; there are too many agencies competing for people, finance and prayer support. Over the next ten years or so, it is likely that we will see some agencies fold. The problem is that there is no guarantees that the forward looking agenciesÂ will be the ones that survive.

None of these issues are new.Â People have been writing these things for years. However, adapting to these changes will take significant leadership and a change in direction which will need to be driven by agency trustees - and here we have a problem. Volunteer trustees are absolutely key to

the work of any charity and they are to be admired and thanked for the time that they put into ensuring that mission agencies can continue to function. However, there are some issues:

- The day-to-day regulatory burden on British charities is huge; trustees have to spend a massive amount of time ensuring that the organisation that they govern is operating in a legal and ethical manner. This means that they have limited time for looking at the future. Martin Lee unpacks this issue in some detail here.
- Because of this, boards prioritise recruiting members with legal, financial, administrative and fund-raising experience. These are all important, but people with this sort of background do not necessarily come with an understanding of current issues in missiology - much less an understanding of the future. Agencies boards need to value mission and development work experience as professional skills alongside accountancy and legal expertise.

This has been a bit of a ramble around a number of issues; I apologise for that. But it has given me the opportunity to draw a number of threads together. I may be a bit more organised in my next post (or I may not).