CHURCHES, AGENCIES, RELATIONSHIPS

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Some random (and incomplete) thoughts about churches and mission agencies.
Category: Observations



A few days ago, my friend Josh posted this thread on twitter, which prompted a few random thoughts from me.

I think the clue to what Josh was raising partly lies in the way in which churches and agencies understand their mutual roles. From my experience, I reckon that there are three basic positions - though these could be nuanced a little.

Agencies Do Mission. There is a perception by some agencies and also by some churches that the work of world mission is the business of specialised mission agencies and that churches have no part in it other than to send people, money and to pray. The "pay, pray and go-away" approach to missionary support.

Churches Do Mission. At the other end of the scale, there are some churches and denominations who see no place for specialised mission agencies in world mission. The churches send their own people out without reference to a third party.

Churches and Agencies in Partnership. The ideal is when churches and agencies each see a role for the other in the work of mission. The roles and perceptions vary from case to case, but there is a respect and understanding of what each body brings to the table. Agencies are able to share with the churches the needs around the world encouraging them into world mission and they are also able to bring their specialist cross-cultural skills to help churches in their UK based mission.

A couple of good examples of how agencies are able to help British churches reach out in their own situation are Neighbours Worldwide from WECÂ and the way in which Latin Link are supporting Latin American missionaries to work with churches in the UK.

The issues that Josh raises are being addressed in a number of settings, but as he goes on to say the key is relationships. However, at this point, I'm not convinced that he has put his finger on the underlying problem.

There is definitely a lack of relationships between many agency and church leaders. However, I don't think the problem is age. There are plenty of young, upcoming leaders in mission agencies, but they are off doing mission stuff around the world. At the point where lifelong relationships are formed, most future mission agency leaders are thousands of miles away being missionaries.

As the CEO of Wycliffe, this was one of my biggest frustrations. I had friends and contacts all round the world, but no one in the church in the UK had heard of me. It was very hard (especially for an introvert) to make the contacts that I needed to promote the work of Bible translation when I didn't fit into any of the networks of friends and associates that were part of everyday life for church leaders in the UK. If agencies want leaders who have serious experience of cross-cultural mission they have to face the fact that those leaders are unlikely to have a good network of contacts in the UK (there are exceptions). Then again, is overseas experience with an agency a necessary prerequisite to leading one?

A second issue is that the British evangelical church is so fragmented, that it is just about impossible for anyone to have relationships and contacts across the full spectrum. What is worse, if you talk to some streams of the church, you almost immediately become suspect to others.

My suspicion (and it makes me rather sad) is that increasingly, individual agencies will become identified with particular streams of evangelicalism, where it is possible to develop a few deep contacts. Only the very, very large ones (and hardly any of those are seriously involved in evangelism) will have a presence across the spectrum.