PAUL VERSUS APOLLOS: THE PUBLICITY BATTLE

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With Luke writing positive stories about Paul's work, Apollos decided that he needed to engage a publicity firm to get his message across (no he didn't).
Category: Observations

One of the things which always amazes me when visiting mission work overseas is the amount of cooperation between agencies. MAF, OMF, SIM, SIL and a host of other three letter acronymed organisations work closely together in host of different ways and situations. At times, the synergy is so close that it's next to impossible to work out who works for whom.

Equally, I'm always struck by the lack of cooperation which exists in the UK. Agencies which work closely overseas find it next to impossible to cooperate to the same degree at home. This isn't to say that there isn't some cooperation; Global Connections does a great job of bringing agencies together and there is the odd roadshow or conference event where agencies get together for joint publicity. However, these lack the sort of integration and mutuality which is a regular part of life in mission work outside of the UK.

There are a couple of reasons for this disparity. The first, is that close cooperation takes time and effort and can touch on issues of charity governance. This means that it can be far harder to integrate work in the UK, where the rules and oversight are generally more developed than in other countries. The second (and most important, if more cynical) reason is that outside of the UK, agencies are doing their work, in the UK they are competing for resources. Every penny which goes to one organisation doesn't go to another and that makes it difficult to cooperate beyond a certain level.

A large part of the operation of mission agencies in the UK is focussed on getting people interested in the work of the agency so that they will either (and you can see this plastered over lots of agency websites)Â **give, pray,Â** orÂ **go** and each agency wants to recruit as many supporters as possible. There is a degree to which agencies do help one another and they will direct potential supporters towards other agencies, if they are a better fit. However, in the main, they push their own agency and don't talk about others. There are a few honourable exceptions, but only a few.

On one level, this is perfectly understandable. Agencies have a duty to promote their own work and to bring in enough resources to ensure that it can continue. Equally, the people who work for the agencies care passionately about what they do and they want to get as many people as possible to share their passion. This is how it should be.

However, there are some problems, too.

The first is that there is an increasing number of agencies in the UK at a time when the number of Christians is not growing and may be declining (depending on the report you read). There are an increasing number of people fishing in a pond that isn't getting any bigger. This isn't sustainable and eventually, some agencies will find that they can't raise enough support to keep going. Now, I'm not worried about the agency structures, they can come and go. However, I am concerned about the good work that agencies are doing. I'd hate to see something really important close down because of a lack of funds from the UK. Agencies need to learn to cooperate so as to head off this sort of issue.

Another problem is what I could call agency fatigue. I've spoken to a number of church leaders who are fed up with being badgered by agency reps looking for support from their church. As I mentioned there are cooperative ventures and roadshows where agencies work together and these are a step forward. However, they still represent a lot of distinct agencies all pushing for support, even if they are all doing so at the same time and place. The number of agencies (and three letter acronyms) is too high and church leaders can't keep track of them all.

A third problem is the way in which the agencies compete through publicity. Most agency leaders don't like to talk about competition within the mission world. However, there is still a drive to ever more sophisticated marketing and publicity. Websites get updated, instagram and twitter feeds get more savvy and agencies work very hard to make themselves stand out in the crowd. Again, on one level, I have no problem with this; you want to tell people about the good work you are doing. That being said, I have two reservations. The first is that the agency with the most money, the sexiest stories and the best contacts in the media is the one that will stand out - that agency may not be the one doing the most important work. The second is that driven by marketing agencies and secular practices some agencies end up saying things that sound great, but which on closer examination are missiologically and theologically dubious. I touched on this yesterday.

I believe that in the medium term agencies need to cooperate much more closely in the UK. This isn't just doing joint projects or conferences, they need to have permeable boundaries and staff who move seamlessly between them. It wouldn't be complicated to update agency websites so as to include relevant links to other agencies working in the same field (some do this already) or to drag in appropriate stories (with attribution) from other sites. Once that sort of relatively simple thing is in place, it would be possible to start contemplating deeper levels of collaboration. However, that is only going to happen if agency boards start to wrestle with this sort of problem. If you know anyone who is a trustee of a UK based agency, please forward this post to them!