WHAT DOES A MISSION AGENCY DO?

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It takes time and a willingness to share and to listen for churches and agencies to understand what they each bring to the table and what their respective roles and expectations are.
Category: Church: UK

Of the making of blog posts about mission agencies and churches, there is no end. I've written tons of them over the years and Stephen Kneale weighed in on the subject, yesterday with a follow up today. In general, I'm broadly in sympathy with what Stephen says, but I thought it might be worth just saying a few things about how agencies actually operate as this might clarify some of the issues he raised. Obviously, what I'm saying here will be based on my experience with Wycliffe, but most of it will be generally applicable.

Broadly speaking, the role of the agency is to help the church in the UK play its role in world mission. This is done by producing publicity materials to inform people in Britain about the situation around the world and the work of the mission. Recruiting and identifying potential missionaries and supporting those missionaries in various ways.

Let's take each of these in turn. The **publicity** materials is the easy one. Wycliffe produces regularly updated figures on the remaining need for Bible translation and uses the web and magazines to tell the story of how translation is progressing. These stories will feature Wycliffe missionaries, churches the UK and local Christians in different ways. They also have the subtext of encouraging people to "give, pray and go".

Recruitment, this is where things start to get complex. During my time as director, we renamed the "mobilisation" department as "church engagement" in recognition of the fact that our role is not to remove people from churches and send them across the world, but to engage with denominations and local churches in their work in mission. The reality is still that individuals approach Wycliffe and vice-versa. However, no one is given application papers to join Wycliffe if they don't have the agreement of their church leadership. The church are involved in every step in selection (we even encourage pastors to come with their members to initial recruitment events) and sending of missionaries.

In an ideal world, churches would be identifying potential missionaries and sending them to agencies, but, in my experience, Â that rarely happens. Partly because of our individualistic approach to things and partly because churches have too many other things to think about. What tends to happen is that the individual comes first and approaches the church and the agency simultaneously.

Support, for missionaries comes in a variety of forms. Let's just list a few of them.

- Training. Wycliffe has a specialist need for linguists, translators and a host of other roles. Local churches are not in a position to provide this training. Even if people are not involved in translation, there are a host of things to learn about language acquisition, living overseas, contextualisation and such like. There is a need for specialist institutions providing this sort of training.
- Finance. Churches provide the finance to support their missionaries. They could simply send the money overseas by Western Union or some sort of bank transfer. This works pretty well in

big cities, though I wouldn't want to rely on it in rural Ivory Coast. However, agencies are able to save on fees by transferring large amounts for multiple missionaries all at once. They also do a lot of the basic admin that is needed so that the missionary can keep track of their tax liabilities in the UK. Another, increasingly important, issue is the government clamp down on organisations sending funds overseas. In order to stop money laundering and the funding of terrorists, there are strict audit requirements on people sending odd sums of money around the globe. Agencies, generally have the personnel and resources to handle this sort of examination (though it's a massive pain in the neck), I'm less convinced that churches would be in a position to deal with it.

- Pastoral, like everyone else, missionaries need pastoral support. Ultimately, I am convinced that this is the responsibility of the sending church. However, when you are living at the back end of beyond, a few thousand miles away, it is very hard for the church to realistically provide good care. No amount of pastoral visits and downloads of church sermons can meet the basic need for fellowship, encouragement and support. There is a need for some sort of support network on the field. This may be provided through local churches - though cross cultural barriers can make this difficult. However, for pioneer missionaries, there may not be a local church for them to meet with. Agencies can also provide specialist care in cases of PTSD or other trauma, which are far more common in mission settings than many people might realise. Another form of support is discipline. Missionaries do step out of line from time to time and they need to be given time for repentance and restoration. It is almost always the support networks on the field who identify that something is wrong, but in my experience any discipline is always worked through in conjunction with the missionary's sending church.

My point is that getting missionaries to the field and keeping them there, healthy and productive is a complicated job. It takes people with specialist and professional skills across the board. An organisation like Wycliffe can't get by with a kind volunteer doing the books on their laptop at home. They need good and experienced accountants supported by a sizeable staff to stay on top of the books, keep the money flowing to the missionaries and to ensure that the agency stays on the right side of ever changing legislation. Very often, this means that agencies have to pay staff to work in the home office, even though missionaries on the field are supported financially by churches. The sad fact is that many churches do not see accounting, HR and other home-based roles asÂ *real* mission - even though they are vital.

In my experience, agencies (in the UK) all see their role as supporting local churches and denominations, though they don't always live up to this ideal. I'd suggest there are two problems. The first is that agencies are focussed on one thing, whereas churches are dealing with a plethora of issues and ministries. If they are not careful, agencies can steamroller churches in their enthusiasm for their ministry. Church leaders must get fed up with agencies sending junk mail and banging on their door, demanding opportunities to speak in services. The second problem is that the complexity involved in supporting missionaries on the field (especially in hard and dangerous places) means

that the church's may get squeezed out (or feel they are squeezed out) by the agency.

Missionaries are in daily contact with their agency friends and colleagues and much less frequent contact with their supporting church. If they are not careful, they can see their primary relationship as being with the agency, rather than with the church.

In the end, I believe that the big issue is one of attitude. Agencies want to serve churches well and churches want to be involved in world mission. However, it takes time and a willingness to share and to listen for the two to understand what they each bring to the table and what their respective roles and expectations are. Agencies need to slow down, not be in such a rush to send people and to give time to sharing their vision and their approach. Church leaders need to build some relationships with agencies. Personally, I don't think that even a large church can realistically work with more than one or two agencies. Better to build a deep understanding and mutual respect with a couple of agencies, than have missionaries scattered across the board. Missionaries, too, have their part to play in this. It can be very complicated to navigate the relationships when you are supported by three or four different churches across the country, but getting this right is important.

For more on this, I'd thoroughly recommend Bryan Knell's book which is linked to below.