FIVE REASONS TO CLOSE YOUR MISSION AGENCY

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Some challenging questions reflections for mission agency leadership and boards.
Category: Observations

On more than one occasion, I've suggested that there are too many mission agencies in the UK. So I thought I'd take the bull by the horns and suggest some criteria by which agency boards could assess whether they should keep going, or close their agency.

You Are Living On the Past

Many (most?) mission agencies have a dramatic story about how they came into being. A charismatic figure who was a bit of a maverick had a vision to reach a part of the world where no one else was working at the time and set up a new organisation to achieve what no one else was doing. These stories are great and they are a part of the mission heritage that we should cherish. However, if your agency is still focussing on its foundation story today and doesn't have contemporary examples of God breaking through barriers, it might be time to move on.

You Are Living In the Past

The world has moved on since your agency was founded. The church has grown enormously around the world, while it has receded significantly in the UK. If you are still talking as though Britain has a special place in the world to take the Gospel to the needy nations, without reflecting these changes then something is drastically wrong. A mission agency which has the same approach today as it had twenty, fifty or a hundred years ago is living in the past and needs to seriously consider whether it has a future.

You've Lost Focus

Many agencies are feeling stretched today. It can be difficult to recruit new missionaries and it is very hard to raise funds when you are competing with the mega-agencies who can afford big advertising budgets. In this environment, some agencies are stretching the bounds of what it is they exist to do. They were founded in order to evangelise in one country, but that is difficult to resource, but they can raise support for building a hospital in a neighbouring country, so they shift their focus. Over time, they can drift into doing something completely different to what they set out doing - and they may not even realise that this has happened. This is particularly a problem if their publicity implies that they are still doing the first thing!

Let me quickly say that I am not talking about agencies which have made a deliberate decision to change their focus because of a change in the context, I'm talking about drift.

Short-Term is the New Long-Term

Fifty years ago, the idea of short-term missionaries was more or less non-existent. Today, most agencies have extensive opportunities for short-term work and many use short-term experiences as their basic entry into long term work. However, if an agency which has traditionally recruited long-term workers finds itself in a position where it can only recruit short-term workers who don't sign up long term then they should consider their future. This is essentially a specific case of losing focus.

Staying Open is Your Focus

It takes a lot of time, energy and money to run a mission agency. Charity law requires the board to do a lot of behind the scenes compliance work that isn't exciting, but which must be done. If an agency has to concentrate a huge proportion of its energy to simply keeping the doors open and the lights on, then it needs to consider whether it should keep operating. When simple financial and organisational survival becomes your focus, rather than the ministry you are supposed to be doing, it's time to move on. This is a difficult one, because these things creep up on an organisation slowly over time, but the board must regularly review whether or not the cost of keeping the agency going is worthwhile considering what it is able to achieve.

Just a few further comments:

- Before anyone asks, I'm not thinking of any particular agencies when I write this. These are general trends that I see across the charity sector, not just among mission agencies.
- At the risk of offending some people, I don't think mission agenciesÂ *per se* are all that important. The important thing is the work of mission and if our organisational structures have passed their sell-buy date, then we need to recognise that, move on and find new ways to get involved in what God is doing.
- The corollary to the last point is that there is an enormous amount of emotional attachment bound up in our mission structures. People have sacrificed an awful lot to work with agencies, often in difficult and dangerous places. Suggesting that they change drastically or even close can be very hurtful to those who have invested a lot in them. We need to respect this investment and care for the people involved, but we also need to recognise that this emotional attachment is one of the things that has prevented agencies adapting to the changing times.

I think the most important question that any mission agency board and leadership team should be asking is whether they should continue to exist beyond the next ten years - and if so, what changes will they make.