CAN A CHURCH HAVE TOO MANY MISSIONARIES?

Posted on June 8, 2018 by Eddie

If I wanted to get there, I wouldn't start from here.Â
Category: Observations

This post, part of an ongoing saga about missionaries, agencies and churches comes as a response to a comment from Chris Howles on an earlier post (if you've not read Let's Talk About Money, you probably should do so to get some context). Chris wrote:

> *Really interesting stuff Eddie. One thing we often think about, maybe youâ€™ve blogged on this before, is churches trying to reduce the â€˜burdenâ€™ of mission partners having so many partner churches (8? 9? 15?) by focusing all the mission budget on just 1 or 2 mission partners. This is not our personal experience as mission partners, but we have seen/heard churches who want a part of the action in about 15 different world contexts, each partner getting Â£250 annually. Itâ€™s great for an exciting and colourful missions notice board with lots of arrows and photographs, but not so good for the mission partner on home leave visiting so many different churches!*

The scenario that Chris outlines is a common one I've made a long study of church notice boards and many of them do, indeed, show the church supporting a whole range of missionaries in different places doing different things. On the surface, this sounds great, the church is involved in lots of different ministries, what's not to like? Actually, I think there are a number of serious problems with this sort of model:

- Unless the church is very rich (and few in the UK are), they will not be able to provide all of the support that their missionaries require, leaving them to raise a significant proportion of their income from other churches and individuals.
- Lines of accountability and responsibility become very blurred when missionaries have a diverse support base.
- As Chris mentioned, home leave can be a nightmare in these circumstances. What should be a restorative time with the home fellowship - building and creating relationships - becomes a constant bash up and down the motorway with a box of leaflets and a PowerPoint presentation.
- It is difficult for church members to wholeheartedly support a wide range of missionaries. In reality, they will pick and choose the ones they want to pray for. Inevitably, the higher profile, exotic missionaries will get more prominence and attention than the quiet ones doing less exciting work.

As Chris says, it is exciting for a church to have a dramatic missionary board, with lots of photographs and coloured ribbons pointing to where the church has an interest. However, I do think that this situation causes a significant number of problems. That being said, I don't blame churches for supporting lots of missionaries. For a start, it's far better than supporting none at all! Moreover, the whole way we have traditionally viewed mission support pushes churches in that direction and once you go down that route, it is very difficult to change.

At the root of the problem is that our traditional view of mission and mission support revolves around the individual, not the church community. If you want to be technical, we have a low ecclesiology. Potential missionaries (perhaps inspired by some agency propaganda) approach their church looking for support. The church's role in this process is responsive, they are asked to provide financial and spiritual backing for a project that the individual has already started to embark on. Faced with a number of requests of this sort, it is understandable that churches only commit to providing some of the support that the individuals are asking for. If churches were pro-active in identifying mission candidates, they would have an obligation for ensuring that they were fully supported, but we generally don't work that way.

However, though a more church-orientated model of mission support would be ideal, it is very difficult to get there once you have a large portfolio of missionaries. Imagine that a church, who already supported a good number of missionaries, decided to get more proactive in identifying potential candidates.

- Firstly, they would have to start refusing support to potential missionaries, this would leave people rather disgruntled, with no possibility of gruntling them in the near future. After all, the church had supported a whole load of other people, why have they suddenly decided to stop?
- Secondly, the church might wish to be pro-active in mission support, but would find itself unable to be so because of prior commitments. Missionaries hang around for decades and a church which wants to move to a new model of support will still have commitments to people under the old system for years to come. They can either hang on till the older missionaries retire, or they can decide to stop supporting them - neither situation is ideal.

I don't think the system of churches supporting lots of missionaries is idea. I think it is understandable and it gathers a momentum all of its own. However, I don't see an easy way (for the church or the missionary) to adopt a newer, more responsible, proactive system. If I wanted to get there, I wouldn't start from here.