FORUM, AGENCIES AND CHURCHES

Posted on August 29, 2018 by Eddie

Some thoughts on Forum, Agencies and a Twitter conversation.
Category: Observations

Yesterday, I posted this on Twitter:

https://twitter.com/kouya/status/1034375115843219456

Let me give a little context for the tweet before I consider some of the responses that I received. Forum is a large, event organised by UCCF to encourage those who are in leadership in University Christian Unions.

> *Forum is essential training for every student who is taking a lead in their Christian Union.*

Let me quickly say that I have nothing whatsoever against Forum, to be honest, I know next to nothing about it - they didn't have it in my day! My interest was raised when I saw a number of mission agencies tweeting that they were heading to forum to set up stands with the aim of recruiting students to get involved in their agency programs. Given the responsibility of the local church in discipleship and sending missionaries, I am uneasy with a situation where agencies are recruiting in the absence of church leaders. This concern could be extended to other events and is not just reserved for Forum.

Anyway, my tweet elicited a good number of responses and I thought I'd post a few below before giving my thoughts on the issue.

Some tweets suggested that the whole idea of mission agencies was illegitimate in the first place:

https://twitter.com/Math1eson/status/1034474899451117570

https://twitter.com/brianjose/status/1034661351677984768

Others didn't see a problem, as long as the local church was brought into the loop at an appropriate time:

https://twitter.com/phil_tinker/status/1034394160466460673

However, the idea of involving one's local church in decisions about involvement in mission doesn't seem to be as obvious to some people as you might expect:

https://twitter.com/oscaruk/status/1034429351276806146

https://twitter.com/brianjose/status/1034658312623738880

It was also pointed out by a number of people that local churches don't always step up to the plate and encourage their members to get involved in mission:

https://twitter.com/johnbagg/status/1034457074837667840

However, this was countered by the suggestion that churches are disempowered in their mission by the way in which the agencies dominate the conversation:

https://twitter.com/brianjose/status/1034656874816319488

https://twitter.com/oscaruk/status/1034694364965097477

Leaving the church/agency discussion to one side for the moment, John Risbridger who has worked with UCCF and is now pastor of a large church added the following to the discussion:

https://twitter.com/JohnRisbridger/status/1034491791054196736

It's hard to argue with this. UCCF has a unique role in training and encouraging Christian students and including a focus on international/cross-cultural mission at their flagship event is a good thing. With that in mind, let's consider some of the issues raised in the tweets.

Firstly, I don't agree with those who suggest that mission agencies are not legitimate organisations (I wouldn't, I work for one). I would agree that there is nothing akin to modern mission agencies in the book of Acts. Some people draw an equivalence between Paul and his companions and today's agencies, but I just don't see it. However, I don't believe that Acts sets out to define how we should structure ourselves for mission, that's not what the book does. Mission agencies are a contextualised response to a particular situation (the danger is that they are unable/unwilling to adapt as the situation changes - but that is another question). However, the key to Biblical Christian life (which includes mission) is always the local church. They should never be an afterthought or brought in late to a conversation about the life of one of their members.

The problem is that, all too often, the way that agencies act sidelines and devalues the local church. I wrote the following a month or so back which touches on this question:

> *The way in which agencies draw people into involvement with them completely circumvents the local church. Godâ€™s primary engine for mission in this world is the local gathered congregation of believers and we should not subvert this. However, that is exactly what agencies do in their publicity and recruitment. Iâ€™ve said things like this before and met a degree of resistance from some (but not all) agency leaders. I am told that agencies respect the local church and value their partnerships with churches. However, when I look at agency magazines, websites, Facebook pages, and Twitter feeds, I find them to be full of attractive appeals for individuals to be involved with the agency and virtually no reference to the role of the church in this.*
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> *Certainly, if people apply to join an agency, their local church will get involved in the candidacy process, but that often comes a few steps down the line after the agency and individual have already spoken. However, if an individual wants to get involved in praying for an agency or supporting them financially, no reference will be made to the local church at all. It is next to impossible for a local congregation to have a thought through and coherent approach to mission support, when agencies are working hard to get individuals from that congregation to support them.*

On Twitter this week, I've seen numerous examples from different agencies of this sort of approach. They are working hard to get students interested in and signed up to their programmes and the local church will be brought into the conversation at a later point. Is there an alternative?

It seems to me that if the aim is to educate and enthuse students about mission, then a cross-agency/church approach might be much more effective. If agencies and some church leaders worked together to produce materials and presentations that attempt to give an overall picture of what God is doing around the world this could be far more powerful than atomised presentations from individual agencies. It would be a better representation of the reality of mission on the field and it would illustrate partnership rather than competition. The whole recuritment bit, could then be pushed a stage down the road. However, I realise that there are problems with this sort of approach:

- It is incredibly hard and very time consuming to pull off cross-agency presentations.
- If agencies are going to spend time and money at an event like Forum, they will want to see some tangible results for their investment. A vague sense that students are more informed and enthused about mission may not be enough.
- I'm not sure about this, but I suspect that UCCF recoups some of the cost of the event by charging agencies a fee for having a stand (this is normal practice elsewhere, but I'm open to correction if I'm wrong). A shift from advertising/recruitment to mission education would probably mean that this income would dry up.

All of the data that I have seen suggests that British Christians are less interested in overseas mission than they once were. I would also suggest that the relationship between agencies and churches has become unhealthy (there are many exceptions, but I believe that the generalisation stands). I would argue that the current way that we (and by that I mean both agencies and churches) work together may well be making things worse, rather than better. My comments about Forum are just one symptom of an issue that runs much deeper, but perhaps if we start to address the symptoms, we may find a cure for the problem.

There were far more tweets in response to my original one than I have included above. Some of them raised interesting questions that I haven't addressed here. If you want to follow them up, then clicking on the link to my tweet at the top of this page should help.