IS YOUR MISSION AGENCY IN CRISIS

Posted on December 7, 2018 by Eddie

Five things that may indicate that a mission agency is facing a crisis.
Category: Observations

This is the first in a short series of posts looking at issues surrounding mission agencies. Some of what IÂ have to say in this series may be controversial, but we shall see. For the most part, my comments are restricted to the situation in the UK and shouldn't be taken to apply to all agencies, everywhere.

British mission agencies face two significant problems. The first is defining what their mission is in a world where the "mission fields" often have far more believers than the "mission sending countries". The second is the whole issue of the future and support of the agency in the face of a decline in the UK churchgoing public and the increasing number of agencies actually looking for support. This post looks at the second of these issues and raises a number of issues which agency boards and leadership teams should be monitoring on a regular basis.

Legacies

Broadly speaking, mission agencies have four sources of funding; regular giving, one-off gifts, support given for missionaries and projects and legacies. Typically, legacies were used to fund discrete projects, or emergencies; one-off capital spending that wasn't part of the normal budget. However, financial constraints being what they are, legacies are increasingly being used as part of the normal, ongoing funding stream in other words, they are being used to pay bills, wages and ministry costs. This is fine as long as the legacies keep coming. However, by their nature, legacies are not a predictable source of income. You can't really know who has left money for you in their will and you certainly can't predict when they will die (this becomes the source of some dark humour in agency finance meetings). This means that if your agency depends on legacies to keep the lights on and no legacies come in, then the agency could face some significant problems.

If your agency is dependent on legacy income in order to meet everyday costs, then you may be only a year or two away from a significant financial meltdown.

Recruitment Trends

Agency recruitment varies year or year; there are bad years and there are good years. However, this volatility can mask long-term trends. In particular, the odd good year, when there is a significant spike in recruitment, can hide the fact that over time the number of people joining the agency is in steady decline. Agency leadership needs to track recruitment over time and not just on a year to year basis.

If your agency recruitment is declining over time (despite the odd good year), then, without significant changes, you are facing oblivion over the medium to long-term.

Retirement Trends

People who were recruited into mission work in the late seventies and early eighties are now coming up to retirement. For a variety of reasons, this was a time when many people were mobilised

into mission work and it means that over the next ten years or so, agencies will lose a significant proportion of their staff. If recruitment is not at the same level today as it was thirty-five years ago, then these agencies will see a decline in their numbers. This has ramifications which go beyond the number of missionaries working for an agency. Very often the people who are most committed to supporting and donating to an agency are those who have a personal connection via an individual missionary. When the missionary retires, these supporters are often lost, too. This means that declining or stagnating recruitment is not simply a medium to long-term problem.

If significantly more people are retiring from your agency than are being recruited to join it, then you may face a significant financial and supporter crisis in the short to medium-term.

Short-Term Teams

Sending out short-term teams can be a huge encouragement for an agency. Without wishing to sound cynical, they are young, full of enthusiasm, social-media savvy and photogenic - everything that a tired, old bloke like me isn't. The excitement of commissioning teams and then welcoming them back a few months later can be absolutely infectious. It is amazing to see how much they have learned, the appreciation they have gained for the work of the mission and the way that God has worked in their lives. It is easy to write magazine articles and blog posts about how well these teams have worked - I know, I've done it! However, the thing is, mission is by its nature a long-term enterprise. Short-term or summer teams are limited in what they can do. The thing is the excitement which surrounds short-term mission can mask long-term decline. An agency can seem to be healthy because they are sending out lots of young, enthusiastic teams, while their bread and butter ministry is withering. (I realise that some agencies specialise only in sending short-term teams and that others use short-term as a way of recruiting for long-term, but the point still stands.)

If your agency has a thriving and exciting short-term programme, but your long-term work is in decline there is an underlying problem that needs to be addressed.

Culture Change

One way in which some agencies are adapting to the changes in the world church is by shifting their focus from sending missionaries to resourcing local Christians and ministries. Effectively they are transitioning from being sending agencies to being grant-making and financing organisations. That is a perfectly valid and appropriate response to the age that we are in. However, it is a massive change and one which is easy to underestimate. Not only does it involve a change in structures and administration, most importantly it involves a change in culture both for the agency and for their supporters. If this change in culture is not handled well and not seen through fully, the agency may find that its personnel and supporting constituency become disillusioned and vote with their feet.

If your agency is increasingly acting like a funding body, but still presenting itself as a sending organisation, then you have a significant problem.

I don't suppose that any agency suffers from all of these issues, but I would be very surprised if any agency did not have one or two of these lurking in the background. However, that is serious enough, any one of these, particularly the first three, could be enough to spell the end of an agency.

At this point, some readers will react that I am being negative and ignoring the fact that God can step in and change everything. Yes, I am being negative, but no, I'm not ignoring the fact that God could step in. The thing is that all of these are the results of long-term trends which God has allowed to continue for years now. Agencies and organisations come and go, and God lets that happen. Yes, it is possible that he will step in and preserve some agencies in a miraculous way. However, that possibility does not mean that agency leadership teams and boards have no responsibility to take a hard look at what is happening and to take steps to prepare for the future.

In the end, my concern is not so much for the agencies themselves, human structures are not permanent. However, I do want to see the good work that the agencies do continue into the future and for that to happen, we need to have viable structures here in the UK - even if they are very different to the ones we have today.