DOES YOUR MISSION AGENCY HAVE A MISSION

Posted on December 17, 2018 by Eddie

I believe that it is perfectly possible for British mission agencies to continue without making any changes. We can continue to tell our stories, raise funds and mobilise recruits and we can have all of the trappings of success, while becoming increasingly irrelevant to the wider world.Â

Category: Observations

Ten days ago, I started a short series of posts about mission agencies. This is the rather belated second post in the series. In that first post, I wrote:

> *British mission agencies face two significant problems. The first is defining what their mission is in a world where the â€œmission fieldsâ€ often have far more believers than the â€œmission sending countriesâ€ . 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.*

The first post, attempted to address the second of these issues and now, I'm turning my attention to the first one. It will take more than one short article to address this issue and I'd like to start by laying a bit of groundwork.

What I'd like to do is to examine the question of what a British missionary agency needs to do in order to carry on and to be successful. Actually, the answer to this is very simple; in order to carry on and be successful an agency needs to be able to attract enough financial support to keep the operation running (and for "sending agencies" a steady flow of recruits). In order to attract support (and recruits), the agency needs a good publicity and marketing strategy. This probably means some combination of print and online communications coupled with some sort of live contact with people from the agency - either reps/fundraisers in the regions or a bigwig giving presentations in churches and conferences. If this publicity is done well and attractively, money will flow in and the agency can carry on doing what it is doing. Looking at things in this way, an agency becomes successful not by doing things across the world, but by telling stories about itself.

(I realise at this point, that I could be accused of being cynical or unspiritual or both, but stick with me.)

In order to appeal to donors and possible recruits, the stories that the agencies tell need to be tailored for their intended audience; people in the United Kingdom. This means presenting information about what is happening in other parts of the world in a way which will solicit the interest of British people and which will hopefully entice them to support the agency in one way or another. So, we have a British organisation doing stuff in other countries in a way which is calculated to spur the interest of other British people. Following this through, a number of conclusions can be drawn:

- An organisation can keep funds and recruits flowing without having any input from people in the countries where it is working. The important thing is to appeal to people in the home country.
- What the organisation achieves on "the field" is less important than the stories they tell about their work.
- It is perfectly possible for an organisation to have a steady flow of funds and missionary recruits and yet be totally irrelevant to the real situation in the countries where they work.

OK, I have to quickly point out, that I don't know any organisation that thinks entirely in this way. However, I believe that this is a temptation that all mission agencies face and you don't have to look very far to see examples of this sort of approach (especially in some areas of fund-raising). The point of this is to demonstrate that organisational income and recruitment are not necessarily a sign that an agency is doing a great job - it could just be a sign that they have a red-hot donor-relations team.

The majority of Christians in the world today are not Westerners, they do not share the same cultural heritage as Brits and their view of mission and how it should work are shaped by their experience of the world, not ours. And given the way that history is going, they are the ones who will determine the shape of the future, not us. If British agencies and churches are to continue to be relevant to what God is doing in the world, their work in mission must take into account the way that Christians in other parts of the world think and see things. This will involve a whole new level of listening and humility and it will mean that we can't always shape our messages in a way that will appeal to potential British donors.

However, I believe that it is perfectly possible for British mission agencies to continue without making any changes. We can continue to tell our stories, raise funds and mobilise recruits and we can have all of the trappings of success, while becoming increasingly irrelevant to the wider world.

What this means is that agencies can continue to cruise along as they are doing at the moment without feeling any imperative to change. It is only as we listen to Christians from other parts of the globe that we will really grasp hold of reality. The other posts in this series will explore this in more depth.