DOES YOUR MISSION AGENCY HAVE A MISSION III

Posted on December 31, 2018 by Eddie

The bottom line is that we have to change our approach to make it possible for Christians from other countries and cultures to contribute to the life of our boards and agencies. This isn't always easy, but, to be blunt, if we aren't interested in changing the way that you do things so that we can learn from brothers and sisters from around the world, then we probably shouldn't be serving in mission work.Â

Category: Observations

A couple of weeks ago in an earlier post in this series, I wrote this:

> *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.Â This will involve a whole new level of listening and humility...*

This isn't rocket science. However, moving from theory (we need to learn from Christians in other parts of the world) to practice (we are learning from Christians in other parts of the world) isn't entirely straightforward.

In the British system it is the board of trustees who are responsible for the long-term strategy of any charity such as a mission agency. However, that same system also overburdens charity trustees with a huge amount of regulatory and compliance work that squeezes out the time for forward planning and reflection. The first step that any board needs to do is to ensure that they have adequate time set aside in their yearly schedule to receive input from a variety of sources and to reflect on what they have learned. I'll return to the question of reflection in a later post. For now, I'd like to consider the ways in which boards can and should receive input from Christians in the parts of the world where they work.

Field Reports: In my experience, most boards set aside time for "field reports", that is to have missionaries come in and share something of their work. This generally involves the missionaries showing a presentation that they have developed for their own supporters and then answering a few questions from board members. This is an excellent way for boards to learn more about the practical things that their organisation is doing on the field. You can't beat first hand reports to give you a handle on what the work is all about. However, as a mechanism for learning about the way in which local Christians think, it is next to useless. No matter how sensitive the missionary is to local issues, they filter everything through their own experiences and through their expectation of what it is that their audience wants to hear (see the issues I raised here). At the very best, field reports give a second-hand view of the way in which local Christians view issues, at worst, they give a completely distorted vision.

Field Visits: Ideally, agencies should have a programme which enables board members to visit the work of the agency on the field from time to time. This is a great opportunity for board members to get a first-hand look at the ministry that they are overseeing. I would go so far as to say that visits like these should be considered obligatory for board service (and should be paid for by the agency). However, as with field reports, they are not a mechanism for getting an understanding of the point of

view of the local Christian community. A visit of a couple of weeks is simply not long enough to get to the deep issues that motivate and guide people. How well would people from abroad understand everything that is going on at your church in a two week visit? Not only that, but most people around the world view visitors (especially "honoured board members") with respect and will go out of their way to present a good picture of themselves and of the work of the agency. They may have a long litany of complaints, but the rules of hospitality mean that they are unlikely to share these with their overseas visitor.

The only way that boards can truly get input from Christians who are the "target" of their work, is by meeting as equals. Practically speaking, this means building relationships over time and including "nationals" (horrible term) as board members. *By having Christians from other parts of the world on the board, agencies get insight into their activities that their own workers cannot provide and, more importantly, they get to exposed to the way in which Christians in other parts of the world think.Â*

Practically speaking, this doesn't have to involve flying people half way round the world for board meetings (though that would be a very good investment); there are enough diaspora churches in the UK for boards to be able to find Christian leaders from any nationality somewhere in this country. I am aware of a number of agencies who have experimented with involving diaspora leaders on their board, but who have not found it a positive experience. It seems that it isn't always easy for people from overseas to fit into the life of a UK board. Let's just think about that for a moment. If a board is overseeing an agency which works in country X, but Christian leaders from X don't feel comfortable on the board, there is a major problem! We should be modelling good approaches to our partners from the top down.

The bottom line is that we have to change our approach to make it possible for Christians from other countries and cultures to contribute to the life of our boards and agencies. This isn't always easy, but, to be blunt, if we aren't interested in changing the way that you do things so that we can learn from brothers and sisters from around the world, then we probably shouldn't be serving in mission work.

This may all seem far removed from the board's work of annual reports, risk registers and other stuff; but if we are to be relevant to the world church in the future, there are far more important issues facing our boards than the day to day stuff of charity regulations.