BOOKS I HAVE READ: CHURCHES AND MISSIONS AGENCIES TOGETHER

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A very worthwhile book for anyone involved in mission support or partnerships.
Category: Observations

The executive summary of this brief review is that mission agency leaders and church leaders in the UK should read it, however, they should expect to do an awful lot of contextualisation if they want to apply the principles that it teaches.

I read Churches and Missions Agencies Together: A Relational Model For Partnership PracticeÂ (CMAT) on Kindle, so I'm not sure how big it is, but it didn't take a long time to read. It is written at a popular level with the odd footnote and academic reference, but nothing to scare away the average reader.

The book emerges from two sources; the editor's DMin, research (hence the academic tinge), and a working group of churches and agencies in Singapore who met together to explore how they might collaborate. The Singaporean context is very important to the book and it shows what can be achievedÂ in a situation where there are a relatively small number of churches and agencies working together in a limited geographical setting. I can't imagine how the ideas in this book could be applied in the UK, where there are so many agencies and thousands of churches. As a former agency director, I could never have met with our key partner churches in the way the book suggests - in fact, we didn't have enough home staff to do the job. However, that doesn't mean that the book has nothing to teach us.

The book has two sections; the first sets out the basis for mission and church partnerships. In the main the material is good, but there is a lack of critical reflection on the ideas which means that the background is not as strong as it might be. For example, the section on the biblical basis for mission agencies does not seriously engage with anyone who takes a contrary view. Likewise, the helpful section on partnerships between churches and agencies being modelled on the Trinity simply assumes that this approach is a valid one, without any real discussion. Perhaps, I am expecting too much from a popular book. The section goes on to discuss a particular framework for church agency relationships which has developed in Singapore.

The second section explores some practical issues which are raised by the church-agency partnership model. These include things such as financial support for missionaries and how to deal with traumatic situations on the field. In my experience, these are areas that agencies tend to have thought through more clearly than churches. The book, very helpfully, sets out who should have the responsibility in each area. Again, I'm not sure how practical some of the concepts would be in the larger, more complex UK situation - but the book provides a good starting point for discussion.

Bearing in mind the issues I have highlighted, this is a very worthwhile book, and I would suggest that anyone who has the care of missionaries as part of their remit, should read it.

A few random quotes:

> *The relevance of missions agencies is being questioned and boundaries are being*

renegotiated.

A large portion of those interviewed support 100% of the financial needs of their long-term missionariesâ€"something in Singapore that is almost unique in the world of missions.

â€œWhat I want to see is missionary sending agencies within denominations learning from the lessons of missionaries sent from the Westâ€¦ I think we need to learn from those lessons and not repeat the mistakes.â€

Another reason church leaders give for wanting to drive their own missions programmes is disappointment with past attempts to engage with agencies.

This divine interaction of mutual deference and glad submission especially informs relationships where one party has oversight of another and grants this other party autonomy and trust to accomplish the mission. The church is called to join Godâ€™s mission; thus, the church has theological primacy in missions but defers its human and financial resources to the missions agency, in order that the agency may take action and better accomplish the cross-cultural aspect of mission. The missions agency has authority and autonomy, which are gladly given by the church. Such an arrangement is only possible with trust and understanding, and is best accomplished through a relationship of love, rather than one of legal documents and contracts.

Having a central role means that a local church cannot abdicate its responsibilities in world evangelisation, and neither can a missions agency operate independently from the local church.

When a missionary does not have a primary sending church but raises funds from a wide variety of sources, there is often no clarity with regard to who the sending church is. In such a situation, there can be no church-agency partnership in practice, and the missionary receives suboptimal member care.

> *Too often, church missions policy guidelines are vague about crisis management, if such guidelines exist at all. The unspoken assumption is that things will not go wrong, or wonâ€™t go terribly wrong. Sadly, things do go wrong, and then leaders scramble to understand the situation and how to care for all involved.*