CAUGHT IN THE MOBILISATION TRAP

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Mission agencies face a crisis and they cannot simply mobilise their way out of it.
Category: Observations

I recently came across a statement from a mission agency (I won't say which one - but many of them say similar things) which said something along these lines; over the last decade we have struggled to recruit new missionaries, so we are investing significant amounts of money in new mobilisation efforts in order to reverse this trend. While, on the surface, this might seem to make sense, I believe that this sort of approach is deeply problematic. In order to explain why let me step back a bit.

Most traditional mission agencies depend on their missionaries for a flow of funds. They may have some external sources of income, but for the most part, their money comes from taking a slice from the money which the missionaries raise for their support. (I realise that there are exceptions to this and that I am generalising here.) So if agencies are going to fund their activities, they need to recruit missionaries who can bring money into the organisation. However, there are a number of problems associated with this.

- It is the natural order of things that older missionaries retire or die. This means that if agencies are to maintain their current level of income, they need to attract new recruits at the same rate as they lose older ones. However, changing demographics and attitudes to mission make this somewhat difficult.
- Short-term mission is gaining in importance over career mission service, this increases the pressure on recruitment.
- The increasing complexity of legislation and the changing expectations of mission workers mean that agencies have to look to increase their HR and finance functions. However, reality dictates that finance and HR staff have to be paid a salary as it can be very difficult to motivate supporters to pay for people in these sorts of roles. This increases the financial burden on agencies and so means that they need to recruit more missionaries to pay the bills.
- Over the past few decades, aÂ number of agencies have seen spectacular periods of growth which have not been sustained. However, this growth has created expectations of what the agency will do and what it will provide which can place severe strain on the organisation in more challenging times. Once new services and initiatives have been put in place, it can be next to impossible to stop them again.

So, many agencies are under significant financial strain and the only obvious way out is to mobilise more missionaries. Which brings us back to where we started. There are a good number of agencies that are investing heavily in creative approaches to mobilisation and appointing paid representatives in different parts of the country. It costs a lot of money, but the agencies need to recruit significant numbers of people if they are to survive in their current form.

The problem is, that the pool from which the agencies are seeking to recruit is not growing (and it may well be shrinking) and interest in long-term mission service is waining. With increased competition for fewer possible candidates, some agencies are simply not going to be able to recruit the number of people that they need and because of this, they won't be able to pay the bills. In the

short, to medium-term, the situation will cease to be viable for a number of agencies - though it would be a brave person who predicted which ones.

There are a number of possible solutions to this scenario:

- Find a niche which helps to ensure recruitment. Some agencies fit nicely into a corner of evangelicalism which means that they become the go-to group when people from that stream are looking to get involved in mission. This sort of approach can help to ensure healthy recruitment, though there are only so many niches (and most of them are occupied) and this doesn't help much for agencies who are intentionally broad-based.
- Sell buildings and other assets to help meet current spending or to subsidise aggressiveÂ mobilisation efforts. The problem with the first option is that once you have sold the family silver, you have nowhere else to go and I've already detailed the problem with increased mobilisation.
- Increase fundraising activities to meet the shortfall. This works well for organisations which already have a significant fundraising/grant-making arm but is much less easy for agencies which operate on the faith-mission-no-solicitation model. The culture change is far more significant than most people recognise.

The underlying problem is that agencies are facing 21st-century challenges while operating on a model which evolved in the 19th-century. No amount of short-term fixes will address this. There is a lot written about new approaches to mission and changes in mission theology, but a lot less attention is paid to the way in which our existing *organisations* need to transform. If agencies are not financially viable, they will not survive long enough for the broader changes in mission to be relevant to them.

At this point, a number of questions might be asked.

What is the new model for mission agencies?Â Frankly, I don't know. I would be very surprised if there wasÂ *one* model. In our increasingly diverse world, I suspect that there are lots of different viable approaches. For some (but not all) agencies the status-quo will work, others will need to adapt radically if they are to survive. For agencies which are investing heavily in mobilisation (trying to keep the old model going), I'd suggest that they might do better investing those funds in exploring what their future role should be.

*Aren't you showing a lack of faith? God will provide.*Â Yes, God will provide for his work. However, that doesn't mean that he will provide for redundant structures to keep going. We make a fundamental mistake when we assume that our organisations and God's work are one and the same thing.

Aren't you just being a prophet of doom?Â Perhaps, but I know that many others who observe the mission scene in the UK would broadly agree with what I've said here. Surely it is far better that I flag up a warning while things can still change, rather than smugly saying that I knew all along that things

would go badly when agencies start to fail. And, hey, if in twenty years it turns out that I was wrong, you could always stone me.

Are you saying that Britain has nothing more to offer world *mission?*Â No, far from it. I believe passionately that the UK has a role to play in world-mission, but it's a different role than the one it used to have. Over the last fifty years, the UK church scene has changed dramatically and the world church has changed even more so and our missionary involvement must reflect this. The problem is that we spend far more time, effort and money on preserving the status quo than we do on exploring what comes next.

In passing, and without wishing to be all politically correct, I wonder - given the rather ambiguous relationship between mission and Western imperialism/militarism - whether we should be using a term such as mobilisation with its clear military overtones.