MISSION AGENCY FUTURES: MISSION STUFF

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Local churches may not have the finance or the all-powerful publicity machine that the agencies can bring to bear, but they must not be treated as passive actors who should just stand around and watch while the experts from overseas get on and do their stuff.Â
Category: Observations

This is the fourth in a series of posts on the future of mission agencies, the first three focused on the present situation for mission agencies, the problem that they face and the process that they need to follow in order to stay relevant to the wider world.

This fourth post eschews the alliterative pattern of the early posts as I am now moving on to look at the three areas of mission activity which were outlined in the first post, mission stuff, getting people involved and logistics. It may be possible to make all of these start with "p" but I can't be bothered (waits for some bright spark on Twitter to suggest something).

Mission stuff consists of the things that the agency exists to do; plant churches, translate the Bible, run clinics etc. Reflecting on the issues raised in the first three posts in this series, the central feature of this one is simple enough; the things that a mission agency does and they way they do them must be worked out in negotiation with Christians in the country or region where they are working. Local churches may not have the finance or the all-powerful publicity machine that the agencies can bring to bear, but they must not be treated as passive actors who should just stand around and watch while the experts from overseas get on and do their stuff.

The key word here is "negotiation". Churches and agencies may well have different priorities and expectations and these need to be worked through with each partner learning to understand and respect the other's perspective. For example, in some parts of the world, it is not unusual for church planting missions to build schools or hospitals; something that they may have no experience, expertise or interest in doing. In this sort of situation, the agency would be unlikely to be able to help with the specific request; though they may have other contacts who could do so. But it is important for them to understand why the local church has the priorities that it has and for the church to understand where the agency is coming from.

However, in many other cases, some sort of understanding can be reached and the agency is able to shape its mission in the light of how God's people who are living in the context (and who will be there after the agency shuts up shop) see reality.

In order for this to happen, it is imperative that the field leadership of the agency have good relationships with local and national Christian leaders. If you are the field director of a mission agency and you haven't met up with the denominational leaders in your country, then you aren't doing your job. I would also argue, that mission boards in the UK need to take steps to ensure that they gain an insider's perspective on the countries where their agency works; field reports from missionaries or talks from local mission staff can only ever tell part of the story. You have to invest in meeting local leaders - especially those who might not be very positive about your agency's work.

Now when I say things like this, one type of response is inevitable; people will say that working with the local church is fine, but they don't care about unreached people groups, or they don't understand the priority of Bible translation... The problem with this sort of reply is that it makes an assumption that our conceptions of mission, be they UPGs, Bible translation needs or whatever, are

universal truths which should be shared by all Christians everywhere and that anyone who doesn't see things our way is deficient in their faith. However, our conceptions of mission are not universal truths and it is perfectly legitimate for people to see things differently. it is quite possible for people to care about the unreached in their country without subscribing to a socio-religious view of people groups which emerges out of another culture on the other side of the globe. If we continue to conceptualise mission through our own framework, rather than trying to understand the priorities and concerns of local Christians we will almost certainly miss seeing how God is at work in that context.

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