MISSION AGENCY FUTURES: LOGISTICS

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Category: Observations

The previous posts in this series have suggested that mission agencies need to both shape their work in consultation with local Christians and to involve local Christians in all aspects of the work if they are to stay in tune with what God is doing around the world. In this post, I'd like to consider some of the logistics issues that may need to be addressed.

The first thing to note is that as a consequence of their missionary society heritage, many agencies have sclerotic decision-making processes which make any change and adaption both slow and difficult. Tradition, the agency-way and the comfort and security of members in their agency family can bring overwhelming pressure to bear when radical decisions have to be made. Most mission agencies are not particularly flexible and this is a major problem. There are complex reasons for this, and it isn't really the point of this post, but it is an issue which needs to be addressed.

Logistics is almost certainly one of the most complex issues that agencies need to address, they have systems which have developed over the years to do one job and if that job changes, then the systems will need to change, too. Let's just take one case; what happens if Christians from the host country join the agency as missionaries in their own right?

The first thing that will need to happen is that the candidate processes which exist in the UK will need to be replicated in the host country. Generally, joining an agency involves a host of forms, interviews and assessments and all of this will need to happen in a new context. This may be a very good time to rethink candidate processes and consider what is essential and what is just extra bureaucracy which has grown up over the years. Whatever happens, the candidate systems used in the UK and the host country should be functionally similar. There are two reasons for this, the first is that being a cross-cultural missionary isn't easy wherever you come from and an adequate screening process is necessary. Secondly, in order to deal with some of the attitudinal issues that I raised yesterday, it needs to be abundantly clear that national missionaries are not in any way of a lower quality to their British colleagues.

Then there is the issue of finance. As I mentioned yesterday, we should not automatically assume that missionaries from other parts of the world cannot raise their own financial support. However, it is quite likely that some missionaries from some parts of the world will not be able to raise all of the money needed for theirÂ ministry and some sort of external finance will be required. This can lead to a division between the "real" missionaries who "live by faith" and raise their own support and the local missionaries who receive some sort of salary or organisational income. In many agencies, these differences are exacerbated by structures which say that only those who raise their own support get to vote on issues or can take on leadership positions. If local missionaries are to play their full role, then policies like these need to be changed, but given the sclerotic nature of agency decision making and the fact that missionaries may effectively have to vote to reduce their own privileges, this could take a while.

The question of how much support the local missionaries should receive also needs to be

addressed. It is not uncommon to see adverts for agencies who insist that we should support local (or native) missionaries because they need less financial support than expats. However, where expats and local missionaries work in the same agency, this is manifestly unjust. What this effectively boils down to is saying that local Christians should not have access to the same medical care as foreigners, their children shouldn't be able to benefit from the same educational opportunities and that they should be excluded from the social life of their mission because they can't afford the cinema or restaurant trips that their expat colleagues enjoy. It is not unusual to hear expat missionaries object to this sort of thing by saying that if local missionaries receive the same support as expats, then some will "only do it for the money". I have two responses to this, the first is that this is why you need good candidate procedures, the second is that many expats thoroughly enjoy having access to good beaches and good food which are available for far less than at home - are they in it for the money, too?

This whole area is a minefield and I've only just scratched the surface of the logistics issues that need to be addressed.

The bottom line for this whole series is that God is at work in remarkable ways around the world and if mission agencies want to remain relevant, they will need to adapt. The specifics will vary from agency to agency, but I hope this series gives some food for thought as agency leaders and boards grapple with the issues.

The Whole Series

1. Mission Agency Futures: The Present
2. Mission Agency Futures: The Problem
3. Mission Agency Futures: The Process
4. Mission Agency Futures: Mission Stuff
5. Mission Agency Futures: Getting People Involved
6. Mission Agency Futures: Logistics