CHURCHES AND MISSION AGENCIES (AGAIN)

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There is not enough cross-fertilisation between those in mission agencies and churches. We have things to learn from each other, but we have different peer and social groups, attend different conferences and, I would argue, we don't respect one another's expertise, contribution and concerns enough.
Category: Observations

This is the first in what may turn out to be a short series on a subject that I have looked at on various occassions over the years. Then again, it may be a one off.Â

My conviction is that the responsibility for mission - be it local or global - lies with the local church. However, I think that it is valid to have specialist organisations in place which can support churches in their mission in a variety of ways. Organisations can help churches work together in an area where an individual church may not have the resources (Street Pastors would be one example), they can provide expertese in areas where churches are lacking (Wycliffe Bible Translators, for example) or they can provide logistics support in the way that most overseas mission agencies do. The growth of specialist organisations has allowed churches to multiply their effectiveness at home and to reach parts of the world that they would never have been able to touch without agency support. Pragmatically and theologically, I have no trouble defending this system, with oneÂ *caveat*, the agency must not usurp the primary role of the local church.

My own field of interest is overseas mission agencies and overall, I believe that they have been a good thing for the church in the UK. They are not without their problems and they are not the only way for the church to operate world-wide, but I believe that they are a good thing. However, I think that there are some unfortunate consequences of the growth of agencies that leave a difficult legacy. I don't think that this is the fault of agencies or churches, it is just a natural development of the way in which things have evolved.

We have a situation where, broadly speaking, if you want to be involved in world mission; Church planting in Japan, medical work in Congo or Bible translation in the Pacific, you will almost certainly have to work with a mission agency. You will go through the approrpriate recruitment process, with church references, interviews and the works. If you are accepted, you will then go through a period of training - and this is where the problem lies. Cross-cultural missionaries need some specialist training that your average church pastor in the UK doesn't require; whether this is an in-depth study of African Traditiona Religion, or an understanding of what different colours of diahorrea mean (yes, we did study this). This difference in training means that, over the years, different training institutions have developed for church leaders and missionaries. Yes, there are exceptions, but if you are training as a missionary, you are likely to go to one or other of the specialist training institutions and you are unlikely to bump into many people training for the pastorate in the UK.

I think that there are a number of unfortunate consequences of this dichotomy.

Church leaders don't study enough about mission. The existence of specialist mission training colleges means that mission, both at a theological level and a practical level has, to some extent, slipped out of the curriculum for church leaders. In a situation where most churches now live in a cross-cultural environment, this is far from ideal.

Missionaries don't study enough theology. Specialist mission institutions tend to focus on mission stuff and give less attention to other issues. This is increasingly true as initial mission training courses

have been reduced to a few months or weeks. Pastors working in church planting in the UK are likely to have spent a three years at college studying theology, biblical languages and the like. On the other hand, it is quite possibly that a missionary church planter, who has to do the same things as their UK based colleague but in a different language, will have just done a few months missionary orientation.

Mission has been sidelined in the life of the UK church. We make the right noises about needing to reach our nation and the world for Jesus, but because of an inadequate theology of mission and a lack of concrete thinking about it, we don't live as a missionary people.

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I realise that I have generalised, there are honourable exceptions to what I have written, but across the board I think my point is a fair one. I don't have an easy solution - but more talking and more cups of coffee have to be a large part of it. I also realise that you can't ever train people in everything that they might conceivably need as a missionary or a church leader - just prolonging courses won't solve the problem.