

From Societies through Agencies to Consultancies – a trend in mission organisations

Bryan Knell

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Introduction

This paper looks at a major trend that can be detected in the relationship between church and overseas mission organisations in the UK. We will particularly be thinking about those groups that send personnel overseas, although there are consequences for the whole mission network. Ignoring the changing culture around us and not preparing now for the situation we can imagine in 5-10 years time is at least short-sighted and could be terminal.

I want to look back and forward. Not that far back, I am not a historian, but look back over the period of my own involvement in world mission – back about 30 years. And then having looked back, look forward and try to predict the way things are going to change. Anyone who predicts the future, whether through a prophetic word or by just looking at the signs of the times, can be quite wrong, as I might be. If I am wrong I hope you will judge me as one who is interpreting the signs of the times rather than pronouncing prophecy.

These changes we have seen, and will see, are influenced greatly by globalisation and post-modernism. Both subjects have been dealt with significantly by Global Connections in conferences and publications during the last couple of years.

Missionary Societies

Those of you, who are old enough, think back with me 25-30 years and if you can't think back that far, then think about some missionary biographies you have probably read. 'Missionary Societies' we called the agencies back then. Being a 'missionary' was a hallowed status. It even rose above that of 'reverend' or 'minister' for many. Most testimonies suggested that the missionary call was something that most people feared getting, but if it did come and you couldn't get out of it, it was worth making the most of, because of the kudos it gave you in the Christian world. It set you apart and was a life calling. To do anything else having been a missionary was a major step down and a loss of status.

It was the missionary society that made it all possible. Belonging to a missionary society made you a missionary. The missionary society knew what it was all about – to the local church it remained an honoured position with a high level of mystique. It was a bit too holy to get too near for the average Christian. You would join the missionary society, commit yourself to it for life, go to Bible College to prepare yourself for this great task and with resolve go through the unending hoops of the application form and the interviews. Why were you doing this? Because it was a special calling which came upon you through your devotion to Christ and your study of Scripture and was far better if it was linked to a key verses from Scripture that came to you in a supernatural way.

And how did you decide which missionary society to join? Well, for many it was not so much a matter of choice but of destiny. Many were born into it because their parents or other relatives had served in for decades before. Just think of the family dynasties connected with various societies. And if it wasn't your destiny through bloodline, it was your destiny through church affiliation. It was a matter of loyalty.

And, of course, you never left. You may have retired or had to return for health reasons but you never left your 'family'. If you had to return and were still healthy, the missionary society often found a job for you, whether or not it was linked to your gifting, because you can't be thrown out of a 'family'.

In those days, the missionary was also tied to the reputation and the clear principles of the organisation. The fact that they had a specific financial policy or attitude to some theological issue was important. By joining the society you were saying implicitly, if not explicitly, that these were issues for which it was worth fighting.

Donations flowed in on a regular basis from loyal supporters. The money came to the organisation for the work of the organisation. I remember well in the 80s receiving cheques with an accompanying letter which often said, "please use this gift where it is most needed in the Lord's work". These donors did not even want to know how their gift was going to be used and often we did not know how it was used because it went into the big pot we called 'General Fund'.

Now, it is not my task to ridicule or make fun of this culture. Far from it. Many key people went overseas and did a marvellous job, but this is simply how it was for the majority of missionaries 25-30 years ago. We may smile at some of the attitudes but we must have great admiration for the commitment and perseverance of those who set up and maintained these organisations. And God used them in remarkable ways to change the world and to bring in his Kingdom.

Missionary Society - Summary

What were the key features of the missionary society?

It was a **family orientated** organisation. You became part of a close spiritual family, which demanded loyalty, commitment and stickability.

It was an organisation with a **reputation and important values**.

Membership was expected to be for life.

The **missionary call** was something very special, supernatural and raised the one called above the hoi polloi. There was a mystical aspect to it.

Money came in for the work of the society not for individual people or projects.

Many aspects of the missionary society are tied to the culture of Christians who led these organisations. They were born before 1945 and often known as the Builder Generation. Their values were loyalty, commitment, tradition, dedication in spiritual discipline and authoritarian leadership.

Mission Agencies

About 15-20 years ago we began to see the beginning of a new type of organisation. The change was gradual and probably some member agencies of Global Connections could still best be described as missionary societies, but the move to mission agency has gained pace and the majority of world mission organisations would describe themselves as mission agencies today.

So what have been the key changes? The name gives us the first hint. Ten to fifteen years ago we were beginning to question the use of the term 'missionary'. It was increasingly unhelpful in 'closed countries'. The 'missionary' stereotype outside the Christian community was a problem. Missionaries were those who destroyed cultures and imposed on people a message they did not want to hear, which was beginning to become politically incorrect. Even if it wasn't true, the missionary community wanted to avoid the stigma. But at the same time the use of the word 'mission' and the need for every organisation that was going anywhere to have a 'mission statement' was being affected. I remember my surprise at seeing a mission statement on the wall behind the till counter of a shoe shop in Loughborough – yes, having a mission was OK.

But the problem was inside the church too. 'Are we not all missionaries?' many people were asking. But if we are all missionaries then none of us are 'missionaries' and some were not happy with that conclusion. But the church was beginning to remove the pedestals for clergy and it would happen for missionaries too. A 'call' was something that all Christians ought to have and not just those becoming professional Christians.

The orientation of the missionary societies was changing. From being family orientated they were becoming task orientated. Rather than just being a Christian presence in a country or going to be faithful in witnessing to the truth, organisations sent from the increasingly achievement orientated West, wanted to attack a task and see it completed. This affected why people joined the organisation and for how long. Most recruitment is now not geared to the reputation of the organisation or the theological convictions of its founders, but to who can best do the job that needs to be done. They were now not just looking for mature Christians with a clear call from God, but secular and technical qualifications as well, because that was what the job required.

This change to task orientation is not surprisingly coincidental with the publicity about unreached peoples groups and the widely circulated statistics which suggested that the task of evangelism can be completed in the foreseeable future. Just the sort of material on which a task orientated organisation thrives.

Many members of mission agencies, particularly the older ones, believe that their organisation has become too management orientated. Our purpose here is not to consider whether they are right or wrong but to recognise the change from family orientation to task orientation that has taken place.

As a result of the change to task orientation, membership is now rarely for life, but for a particular assignment. We are all aware of the rise in short-term assignments, but even for those who go for longer periods, contracts for assignments are becoming

more the norm. It follows too that 'the call' is not a mystical thing but rather a recognition that the gifts God has given you fit with the need of the time or of the assignment. Contracts are also about accountability, which ties into a task driven culture.

Task orientation has meant that now donors are not happy to just give their money to a 'General Fund' to be used at the discretion of the agency. They want to give to a project, which is committed to a task. Many agencies today are receiving money for personnel and project, but are struggling in the area of operational or administrative funds, because they are seen as only pushing paper around!

It will not be a surprise to most of you, that the structure and values of the mission agencies that most of us are part of today, are based on the values of the Boomer generation (those born between 1945 and 1964). I am a boomer and when I became UK Director of Arab World Ministries at the age of 38, I was one of the youngest mission CEOs. From that time on we, boomers, have crafted a change in the organisations we have led. Our values have been achievement, excellence, moving forward, consensus leadership and linear and logical thinking.

Mission Agencies - Summary

Missionary Societies have become Mission Agencies

The family orientation has changed to a **task orientation**, with a commitment to achievement, excellence and evaluation.

The organisation needed to have a **proven management reputation** rather than a good reputation and important values.

Membership was not expected to be for life but rather until a task was accomplished or until a person's particular contribution was complete.

The call was more to do with 'best fit' rather than with a mystical spiritual experience.

Money comes in for specific projects, not just for the work of the organisation.

During the later stages of this change we have seen local churches demanding a more directive role in what happens in recruitment, ministry and member care. The agencies have welcomed this development, as a sign of greater awareness and responsibility but have also struggled to know how best to respond.

World Consultancies

Having seen a change from missionary societies to mission agencies over the last 20 years, we now need to look into the crystal ball for the next 20 years. The influence of churches has increased and they are now much more part of the world mission dynamic than they were 20, or even 10 years, ago. The changes in church attitudes are going to affect the ways agencies operate far more than ever before. The 'pray and give' approach of 20 years ago has faded away and many churches want to be more involved. Income is dropping for many agencies because churches

want to consider before God how their money is to be used and not just hand that responsibility to another group.

Today, it is Generation X who are coming to the fore in agency and church leadership. Because the characteristics we have seen in the past have tied in so closely with the culture of the Builders and Boomers, we can expect the changes in mission organisations during the next 20 years to be stimulated by the Gen-X leaders.

So what are the key characteristics of the culture of those who lead churches and agencies today – choice, change, suspicion of organisations, spontaneity, relational interaction and searching for the spiritual.

We live in a choice culture. We no longer pick our goods from a selection of designs that someone has decided will be good for us – we expect many alternatives so that we can pick the product that we feel is best for us. The supermarkets are bursting with selections and demand that we make a choice to suit ourselves. Even in the area of something as basic as bottled water, there is now a vast array of lightly flavoured waters, still and sparkling. It is now getting to such an extreme that it is recognised that we are confused by choice and have to employ 'choice agents' to help us choose for ourselves.

Secondly, there is a suspicion of organisations today. People like to work in teams, where structures and rules are based on relationships. Mentoring is popular, again because the personal relationship is predominant. Organisations on the other hand are seen as large, impersonal, mysterious, uncontrollable, unwealdy institutions that cannot be influenced from outside. One consequence of this is that people today are very reluctant to join anything and if they do it is for a limited time with a particular objective in view. Membership, particularly long-term membership, is becoming out of fashion.

I believe that over the next 20 years, many mission agencies are going to need to adapt and become World Consultancies. Instead of being task-orientated organisations they will become service orientated. They will provide a service based on the wealth of their experience, their expertise and what they have to offer.

They will not just provide a service to their members, as they usually do now, but because membership of organisation is likely to drop, they will need to provide a service to whoever is willing to pay for it.

They will not be able to provide the service free because they will not have a large committed membership whose regular personal donation income can help cover the overheads. They will have to charge for and therefore market their services. It follows that those services must be known to be good and priced appropriately.

Many churches today are doing their own thing and ignoring the agencies altogether. Global Connections is committed, on behalf of its members, to persuade the churches that the agencies have a wealth of experience that they cannot afford to ignore if they are going to be effective in helping to build the Kingdom of God.

Some churches for some time to come, are likely to want to buy into a complete package that does everything for their worker heading overseas. For those churches

the present system of mission agencies will still be relevant, for the immediate future. But increasingly the larger and growing churches, who want to have more control and are careful about the way they spend their money, will choose services from a variety of organisations.

If, for example, a church wants to send someone to black Africa, they might well buy the services of one group to provide orientation, another for health care, and others for finance management, theological training and language learning. They may even choose a further group or indigenous church with which to be linked for direction and member care in Africa. We are blessed in the UK with agencies who can provide all the range of services that a church sending someone overseas will need, but it is because churches have thought that they have had to plug into one uncontrollable system for all these services that many have decided to be completely independent and have thereby deprived themselves of the experience available. I do believe that churches and individuals would be willing to pay for services that they believe are important, well-presented and good value for money.

Obviously, some groups like Interhealth and some of the colleges have already acted like World Consultancies. Wycliffe was ahead of its time in offering, many years ago, a linguistics course to those of other agencies. But I believe that with the right promotion and publicity, the member agencies of Global Connections can effectively contribute to world mission around the world, not by just the work of their own members, but by offering the services, that they can rightly be proud of, to the world mission community.

If this change from mission agencies to world consultancies is going to take place over the next 10-20 years, then agencies today are going to have to change the way they think about themselves, organise their structures, develop, promote and price their services. Those that can't modify their ethos and structures are likely to shrink in size and will not be able to offer their considerable resources or experience to the wider UK world mission constituency.

Christians need to ask, of all trends, whether they should be welcomed or resisted. Moving from missionary societies through mission agencies to world consultancies is a change of culture. As with all cultural changes there will be a fading of important aspects and values and our culture will be poorer without their prominence. But other new characteristics, we can welcome and use to develop the mission of God to the world. This trend could indicate the moving of world mission from the margins of church life, to being much nearer the centre of church concern and passion. This result would herald a very major and exciting change in church culture in the UK.

Bryan Knell
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