

UK to global mission: what really is going on? A Strategic Review for Global Connections

Updated summary of seminar presentations to Global Connections Conference - 'Mission in Times of Uncertainty' by Paul Hildreth 28th – 30th November 2011

Part 1: Messages from and to the church

Part 2: Messages from and to mission organisations

Purpose

This note provides a background summary of the key findings and conclusions of a qualitative strategic review undertaken for Global Connections and forms the background to two seminars presented at the Conference on 28-30 November 2011. It should be read alongside the two accompanying presentations. The review focussed on the following two questions:

- **What are the key trends impacting on UK to Global Mission?**
- **What are organisations doing to respond to these trends?**

Within the review, consideration was also given to what the implications might be for the future role of Global Connections. This has been the subject of separate presentations to the Global Connections Council and Board.

A total of 35 interviews (of 37 people) were carried out. These covered churches/denominations, mission agencies (large, medium and small), primarily UK agencies, service agencies and colleges. They represented the views of different traditions reflected within the membership of Global Connections as well as a mix of women and men and different ethnic and cultural perspectives.

Findings:

1. What are the key trends impacting on UK to Global Mission?

The context for UK to Global Mission is shaped by a complex mix of economic, social, faith based and organisational change issues. Given the speed and depth of change

across the world, these are having a significant impact on the context for the UK role in global mission. The drivers which interviewees saw as particularly significant at the present time were:

- **Economic** – The present crisis in the financial and economic system in the West has shifted economic power eastwards (e.g. the growing emergence of China and other East Asian economies) and has left a significant burden of indebtedness in Western European nations (including the UK) and the prospect of low economic growth for an uncertain period ahead. A fall in real wages, the deepening squeeze on pensions, personal and student debt will continue to put family incomes under real pressure.
- **Poverty and social challenges** – There is a greater awareness of and engagement with, the challenges of poverty (and food and water security) by churches in recent years within the context of a shift towards a broader understanding of ‘integral mission’.
- **Global warming** - Whilst ‘creation care’ is seen as an important element within ‘integral mission’, ecology has possibly gone down the priority list for the moment as other challenges, particularly finance and the economy, are seen to dominate and messages about ‘global warming’ become increasingly mixed from protagonists of different viewpoints .
- **Religion and multiculturalism** – There is a strong desire to develop effective responses to and engage with the growth of Islam and embrace opportunities provided by a more multi-cultural society locally as well as globally. At the same time, a growing trend of political correctness in society has made many people more cautious in what they are prepared to share.
- **Communications** – The transformation in the speed, cost and convenience of travel and in electronic communications has revolutionised personal engagement with people and places globally. It is facilitating ‘entrepreneurial’ mission and the direct engagement by churches with partners and projects around the world.
- **Migration** – Ever since the early days of Christianity, migration has been a key contributory factor to the spread and development of the church. Migration from village to town, from town to city and abroad is re-shaping the context for mission. It is now possible to reach out to people of different faiths and cultural backgrounds in our local community as well as globally. It also challenges the traditional rural paradigm of global mission that has frequently been institutionalised within UK ‘people sending mission’.
- **Rural to urban** – More than half the world’s population is now living in urban areas. This proportion is growing rapidly with five million more people every month moving to live in the cities of the developing world. Despite this, the dominant paradigm of

UK to global mission remains rural and there is little sign that the different challenges presented by urban models of mission have been grasped or are appropriately understood.

Church

These and other drivers have impacted on the UK church. Some interviewees talked about an **old paradigm** that may have existed some decades ago or for some churches even more recently. Whilst there is a risk of over simplification, within this paradigm you were either clearly in the membership of church or outside of it. Mission was seen mainly in terms of proclamation, centred on local evangelism and supporting the 'people sending' work of the overseas mission agencies. People with a calling to go overseas frequently went for all or most of their working lives.

Church today (**new paradigm**) was presented as a more complex picture. Trust in institutions is lower than it used to be and people frequently take longer to journey from entering to belonging and to believing. Hence church has a 'ragged edge' of people who might come regularly, but who might not have yet come to fully belong or believe. The perspective of mission has also changed. Many interviewees talked about their personal journey from a 'proclamation' to an 'integral' (or holistic) understanding of God's mission, where personal salvation and demonstrating the Gospel is a part of God's wider plan for the redemption of the whole world. Lausanne, Chris Wright and Tom Wright were often quoted as sources of influence. It was a common understanding amongst interviewees with cultural, ethnic and family roots outside of Western Europe. A narrower 'proclamation' understanding of mission was expressed by a small minority of interviewees who held to a conservative (classical) evangelical position.

Local mission is now increasingly centred on building community in a multi-cultural context with increasing stress being placed on operating effectively across the 'sacred-secular' divide. There is a growing interest in new ideas, such as 'Fresh Expressions' and in other different approaches to reach out to younger people. There is a recognition that church is more 'messy' than it used to be. Whilst a few saw this as a worrying trend, more saw it as a dynamic source of new opportunity and potential future growth for the church.

This complexity is reflected in how churches relate to the world. The earlier universal and faithful relationship with overseas mission agencies has been considerably weakened and only remains strong within some denominational (e.g. Baptist,

Presbyterian Church of Ireland) and conservative evangelical settings. Churches are increasingly engaging with development, justice and poverty issues, establishing their own direct relationships with projects and churches overseas and being the source of new independent 'entrepreneurial' mission. This is particularly the case in growing church movements (e.g. large churches, the Black church, charismatic and Pentecostal churches, new church movements). These changes are having significant implications for the future funding and role of mission agencies.

Mission agencies

As a result, the world of mission agencies is changing. Not only do they have to respond to the relative decline in UK church numbers, but the constituency of churches that historically supported them faithfully are diversifying their approach to global mission. They are also facing competition from development and poverty relief agencies as well as churches and individuals doing their own thing.

The reduced trust in institutions has also impacted on them. Direct financial giving to mission agencies has declined considerably, with 'pooled funding' for mission partners no longer an option for most. BMS and the Presbyterian Church of Ireland are exceptions to the rule. There has been an almost comprehensive switch to an 'individual support' model, with agencies helping their mission partners to raise funds and taking a proportion (often 10 or 12.5%) towards their own operational costs. People are still coming forward in the UK to go overseas on mission. However, the definition of long-term mission has changed from 'life' to rolling programmes of 2 to 5 years and an average period abroad of 10 years or less. This is a challenge, because it can take up to 10 years for someone to become linguistically and culturally really effective, depending on where they are sent. Mission agencies have also been responding by developing programmes of short-term mission to supplement their long-term programmes. It is felt strongly that for short-term programmes to be most effective, they need to be inter-related to long-term programme activities, wherever this is possible.

Mission agencies are also responding the enormous growth of the church in the Global South, which has greatly altered the nature of their, and their mission partners, missional role in a context of sending from the UK to the rest of the world to one where people are being sent from anywhere to anywhere (including increasingly to the UK to reach UK nationals and immigrants who come here from all over the world).

2. What are organisations doing to respond to these trends?

The interviews revealed three broad responses to the above trends amongst the mission agencies and other interviewees. These were:

- **Operate within the model** – Mainly large mission agencies.
- **Reform the model** – Large, medium and small agencies.
- **Challenge the model** – Largely coming from outside mission agencies from churches, colleges and non-Western European cultural perspectives.

Some interviewees outlined strategies that their organisation was taking that fit within more than one of these categories.

Operate within the model

These are strategies that make good business sense in responding to the challenges outlined above in seeking to preserve the 'people sending model', in circumstances of economic and cultural pressures. These include a mix of:

- **Reducing staffing and other operational costs**
- **Removing unnecessary regional or local structures in the mission agency**
- **Growing volunteer and supporter base around the UK**
- **Updating the agency's strategy and increasing marketing spend**
- **Becoming more distinctive to appeal to a core church supporter base**
- **Moving from 'pooled' to 'individual' support model in nearly all cases**
- **Separating 'operational management' from CEO leadership role**
- **Improving mission partner selection methods and quality**
- **Improving church relationships and participation**
- **Focusing on mission partner retention in the field**

Will it work? Some of the interviewees were confident that these strategies would be effective. They pointed to successful mission partner recruitment and that those selected were able to raise the finance they needed to go out into the field. Having a denominational base (e.g. BMS) or being able to appeal to a clearly identified and sympathetic church constituency was perceived as a significant advantage.

Others were not so sure and felt that in looking ahead there were questions about the traditional 'people sending' model that needed to be addressed. Issues raised include:

- **Churches were sceptical whether the 'personal support' model was sustainable in the mid- to longer-term** – Whilst they wanted to be encouraging, they could see problems ahead in the sustainability of this model. Issues such as the increasing costs of living in different parts of the world, the growing universality of the model and the financial pressures felt by churches and their congregations were issues.
- **There are not enough people coming forward** – Was my research skewed by talking to the market leaders who presented a relatively optimistic picture of what was happening? Some of the interviewees were much more pessimistic about prospects.
- **The definition of 'long-term' is declining whilst sending costs are going up** – It is no longer clear that sending is always a cost-effective option for the churches.
- **Are the 'opportunity costs' of sending people being taken into account?** – A number of important questions were being asked:
 - Are the people being sent being used effectively in relation to the costs involved?
 - Are there other more cost effective methods of doing mission alongside sending people?
 - Are those being sent out and the agencies involved collaborating enough?
 - Is the UK approach to global mission sufficiently strategic in an early 21st Century context?
 - Is the 'unreached peoples groups' model appropriate for prioritising mission resources anymore?
 - Why does a rural paradigm and model still dominate in an increasingly urbanising world?

Reform the model

Some of the responses indicated a desire to reform the model. Such strategies include:

- **Moving international HQ to the Global South** (e.g. Singapore and Kuala Lumpur).
- **Devolve to regional operations in other parts of the world** (e.g. Africa, Asia).
- **Devolve to national leadership** – In countries of operation.
- **Support and empower more national workers** - Particularly in evangelism and church planning.
- **Appoint people from Global South to UK Board** – To bring a broader perspective.

- **Increase mission agency collaboration in the UK** – Work together to resolve challenges.
- **Increase mission agency collaboration in the field** – Including developing more strategic network models of mission.
- **Move from ‘partnership’ to ‘inter-change’** – In a context of mission from any-where to any-where and encourage reverse mission to UK.
- **Shift from doing to facilitation** – Moving from providing people in the field towards services to enabling others (particularly nationals) to serve in the field.
- **Engaging more in the civic and corporate realm** - More energetically crossing the ‘secular-sacred’ divide.

Challenge the model

Others were more willing to challenge the model. They were usually looking in from the outside of mission agencies and were looking ahead. They were no less passionate about mission, but could see that the traditional ‘people sending model’ from the UK might increasingly become out-dated and unsustainable in a global mission context. One interviewee described this paradigm as being like ‘traditional manufacturing’ in a ‘producer services age’. They were also concerned that the funding model that the mission agencies rely on was preventing them from taking the longer-term view or being insufficiently strategic in ‘thinking outside the box’. They felt that whilst there is not yet a crisis, there is a need for a wake-up call whilst there is still time to work through collaborative solutions across the mission community. Such a response should involve the church, mission agencies and the colleges.

Conclusions

1. It was an enormous privilege to have the opportunity to undertake this research and meet so many people who were passionate about God’s mission to the world.
2. Many of those interviewed were brought up within a mission context and usually became Christians at a relatively early age. Whilst this provided deep knowledge, passionate commitment and long experience of mission, mission agency leaders ought to be aware that it also can be a barrier to ‘stepping out of the box’ to question existing models early enough.
3. One such model that does need to be challenged is the present domination of a rural paradigm of mission in an urban age that appears to be more influenced by historical and cultural issues rather than theological considerations.

4. From the interviews undertaken there is little evidence of an immediate crisis. However, there are clear signs that sustaining the traditional 'people sending' model will become ever more challenging in the future. There is time to plan ahead and work through solutions, but to do so will involve collaboration and innovation.
5. This collaboration should be extended further into the field to offer a strategic response to the opportunity cost issues raised in this note and the presentation.
6. There is also a need for a greater strategic engagement between the church and mission agencies about the long-term future of the UK role in global mission focussing on the opportunities for effective collaboration for the future and the evolution of new sustainable and effective models.
7. Global Connections (with its members) has an opportunity to play a role in helping the mission community and churches to shape a revised paradigm for mission. To do this it would need to strengthen its policy shaping capacity.

Paul Hildreth, updated 14th February 2012