

Opening Pandora's Box
Local churches driving change

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What churches think, what churches do and what churches plan will always have a considerable impact on mission agencies.

Global Connections has always been very aware of that and over the years through the work of George Baxter, Interaction, Barrie Taylor and now more openly through Church Associates and Global Options – we have tried to represent agencies to churches and visa versa. That work is now more important than ever.

Firstly, I think we have to recognise that churches are changing dramatically, **NOT ONLY IN THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO WORLD MISSION**. We get so involved in world mission we see things just in relationship to our major concern, but the context is much wider than that.

The number of books, conferences, magazine articles and websites relating to the 'different way of doing church' is impossible to keep up with. I attended two major conferences last year and could have attended six.

Church leaders are usually aware of a declining involvement in church and then Peter Brierley and Heather Wraight come along with some statistics and confirm their worst fears. Churches have to do something radical and it is in that context that changes are happening in their attitude to mission agencies.

Local churches are driving the need for agencies to change.

Let me identify six different sorts of churches, that I am in touch with, and mention just one problem that each sort of church has with mission agencies. Each of these problems is not only linked to this sort of church. I will be very general.

Big, evangelical established churches

Let's start with the big, evangelical, churches – the ones we all know, those who have a reputation for being missionary-minded. (The sort of churches that were featured in 'Ten Sending Churches', if you are old enough to remember that book.) The ones which give thousands of pounds a year to mission agencies. Surprisingly, they are the churches that are contacting Global Options at the moment.

Many tell me they are tired and stale, as far as world mission is concerned. They have been doing all the right things, but they are not satisfied. They are in line with all the advice in the 'How to' books but it doesn't work. "We need help, but we are not sure why."

So what's the problem?

Agencies do not fire the churches' imagination

Churches are finding it difficult to involve new people. The stalwarts keep things going? They find it difficult to get young people involved?

There is little vision, excitement etc. What they hear from mission agencies seems to have little to do with the world they live in – that they assume is represented on the TV news.

Some would say that there are few characters in world mission, today?
We have our strategies, our systems, but we are lacking the flair?

We are not firing the imagination and stimulating vision in the churches – that's our first problem.

Result is that these churches find it difficult to develop or deepen an interest in world mission and any support for your agency.

Fast growing churches

In many ways this is the exciting development in church life today. Denominational and non-denominational churches, with able and dynamic leaders. Many renewed Anglicans fall into this category. They are not afraid to abandon the forms, robes, liturgy and traditions of the past.

So what's the problem?

Agencies are seen as inflexible, controlled by policies and rules and take too long to act.

These churches have the initiative, the entrepreneurial spirit and the leadership to do it themselves. The problem with the agencies is that they have so many procedures and policies and it all takes so long and so much talk.

These churches can develop a link with another church and develop a twinning arrangement.

They can arrange a trip.

They will send a business man, even set up a business, an orphanage etc

They are not prepared to wait around. They want to see things happen quickly and without organisational paraphernalia.

The result is that these churches do their own thing.

They are not interested in your agency, because they think your agency won't get on and do something.

Medium-sized, more traditional churches

These churches represent the greatest number of churches in the UK. They may not give vast sums individually, but because there are quite a lot of them, their combined effect on the agencies is very significant.

They often have good leaders, but they are restricted by traditions that are well engrained in the culture of the church. There is an eldership or leadership, whose heart is in the right place, but they do not have the dynamic to move people forward.

So what's the problem for these sort of churches?

There are many bad agency presentations

I cannot emphasise this enough. We are, and we have been for years, blighted by disastrous mission presentations. The situation remains to haunt us. Its effect is considerable. Many agency presentations are a real turn off for anyone under 50.

In the last year, a considerable number of church leaders have said to me, we invited so-and-so, but we will never have anyone from that group again. Some have said this has happened a few times, we are never going to invite any mission speaker we don't know.

They may be brilliant, the other side of the world, but they were useless here.

Now, of course, your agency never sends anyone who is not a good presenter. BUT, you suffer because of others. They may not invite your agency because of a bad experience with someone from another group. Or if they do, they turn out to hear you may be poor because people have been put off by the last disaster.

We put thousand of pounds into good CDs, videos etc, we have a few brilliant presenters and then shoot ourselves in the foot by sending out people who are a disaster in front of a group.

So the third problem is our bad presentations.

The result is that the church does not get any international mission input, but uses local world mission opportunities – refugees and asylum seekers.

New Churches

Many New Church streams have, in effect, set up their own agencies. Most of them went through a period when they were very sceptical of other organisations and that included mission agencies. During the days of separation and isolation, these churches developed links and planted churches around the world. They are involved in training leaders, inspiring churches and in humanitarian aid.

So what's the problem?

Agencies face growing competition

Now, of course, for many of these New Churches, the desire to remain separate and to be very sceptical of other organisations has gone. They are passed that. They have moved on. They want to work with others.

But the agencies and links they set up are still operating. One attraction of what they do is that churches are working around the world through those with whom they have a relationship.

The result is that it is still very difficult to get New Churches to support our agencies. They have their own organisations set up.

Link churches

I was talking to Terry Virgo at Keswick this year. The fact that he was at Keswick is significant and encouraging. (He was greatly appreciated.)

He told me that a large number of traditional, established churches in the UK are now linked with NFI. They were not started as NFI churches but they have linked up with NFI while still being Baptist or Methodist or whatever. These churches tend to adopt the projects of NFI, rather than others. It is easier to do so, and they are working with those with whom they have a relationship.

So what's the problem?

Agencies do not appear to be making a difference

The result is that the international involvement of NFI seems to be much more dynamic, more immediate, more user-friendly, more accessible.

Smaller churches

These churches are struggling for survival. They rarely have a full-time leader. They are short of workers, resources and money.

They are more likely to have a representative from an agency to speak, because they have to fill the pulpit. They need help.

So what is their problem?

Agencies make them feel guilty

They are guilty about their size and the fact they are struggling in their own community. They expect to be made to feel guilty about what they are doing in world mission. Many of them quite enjoy feeling guilty.

The result is that the need to survive, stops them doing anything except from recognising the fact that they should be doing something.

So here are some of the problems churches have with agencies. Churches themselves are struggling today. For many churches, the mission agencies are not scratching where they are itching. Most are unsatisfied with what they get from us, and more especially UNSATISFIED WITH THE EFFECT IT HAS ON THEIR CHURCH. Mission agencies need to change if they are going to continue to attract church support.