The Future of Mission Agencies

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1. Introduction

Before proceeding, we need to briefly define what we mean by the term "mission agencies." Ralph Winter distinguishes between two types of church structure: the settled church structure or modality, and the missional structure or modality.[1] However, though Winter's definition is widely used and discussed (see 3.1 below), it is too broad a term for our needs, covering, as it does, a wide range of structures not all of which would be termed mission agencies.

In historical terms, the genesis of mission agencies is often traced back to Carey's 1792 *Enquiry into the Obligation of Christians, to use Means for the Conversion of the Heathen* and the subsequent founding of the Baptist Missionary Society.[2] Carey suggested the establishment of voluntary societies with the purpose of enabling Protestant Christians to serve as missionaries in far away places. These societies would be governed by an independent board that would take care of the necessary administration and recruitment in the UK. Over two hundred years later, most missionary agencies are still run on broadly similar lines to those suggested by Carey, though with the added complexity which comes from being international organisations with administrative and governance structures in a number of countries.

It is difficult to define agencies in terms of what they do. The primary purpose of the earlier mission agencies was evangelistic, though education and medical work were often part of their remit as well. Latterly, specialist organisations have come into being that focus on areas such as support for the persecuted church, Bible translation, relief and development, and other areas of social action.

Equally, it is difficult to define mission agencies in terms of their relationship to churches. Some, such as Wycliffe Bible Translators, my own agency, are governed independently of any church or denominational structure. Others, such as Grace Baptist Mission, are quasi-independent, as the missionary arm of a denomination. The Anglican CMS shares many of the characteristics of a mission agency, but is actually a community of the Church of England: a missional and dispersed expression of the Church. Moving a step further, there are also churches and denominations that are involved in overseas mission work without any intervening agency structure.

Practically speaking, within the UK context, the simplest way to identify evangelical agencies is by looking at organisations which self-identify as such through membership in Global Connections, a network of UK agencies, churches, colleges,

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[1] Ralph D Winter, "The Two Structures of God's Redemptive Mission," *Missiology: An International Review* 2, no. 1 (1974): 121–139.

[2] William Carey, *An Enquiry Into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens* (London: Carey Kingsgate Press, 1961). There were a number of Protestant mission structures which predate Carey, including the SPCK (1698) and the USPG (1701). The Cromwellian parliament in 1649 debated the establishment of a society to support mission in North America {Cox:2009th p.8, 13}. There were also a number of continental mission structures in existence as Carey acknowledges in his *Enquiry*. However, Carey provided both a theological rationale and a pragmatic structure which allowed for the flowering of the Protestant mission movement.

and support services.[3] This excludes a small number of agencies who have chosen not to join Global Connections, but it does include the vast majority.

Even this definition leaves us with a wide range of organisations to consider. For the purposes of this paper, we will concentrate principally on what Fiedler terms "faith missions," those which "trace their origins, or the origins of their principles, directly or indirectly back to the China Inland Mission."[4] This includes most of the larger, well known agencies such as OMF, AIM, SIM, and Wycliffe. These agencies place missionaries across the world and have links to many churches and denominations but are not ultimately responsible to any particular church group.

1.1. The Historical Context

Evangelical missions developed at a time when it was possible to conceive of the world as being divided into a Christian West and the non-Christian rest. The distinction between the two was clear and mission could be distinguished from other forms of Christian service because it involved travelling out of the Christian world into the non-Christian one.

The political world in which the British mission agencies developed was one dominated by Empire. The places to which British agencies were sending missionaries were also very often the same places that became colonies of the British Empire. Though the relationship between the colonial authorities and missionaries was complex, they did, to some extent, become closely entwined, with the government seeing missionaries as part of the strategy for expanding colonial reach.[5] From the point of view of those receiving the missionaries, it could be very difficult to separate out the religious agenda of the missionaries from the political and commercial agenda of their colonial overseers. There was also an inevitable power gap; the missionaries being seen to be backed by the vast wealth and military power of the empire.

Mission agencies developed in an intellectual climate dominated by the enlightenment and a period of rapid technological development. Agencies tended to be highly pragmatic organisations which rapidly adopted new practices from the business and commercial world in order to further the missionary cause.[6] Over the succeeding 200 years, mission agencies have also been quick to adopt new technologies such as radio, computers, and the internet for the spread of their work. At the same time the enlightenment separation of the sacred and secular tended to distance missionaries from the people they were serving, as they often failed to appreciate the complex spiritual worldviews of many societies worldwide.[7]

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[3] Global Connections, "List of Members," Global Connections, http://www.globalconnections.org.uk/list-of-members/all (accessed 19 August 2015).

[4] Klaus Fiedler, *The Story of Faith Missions* (Oxford: Regnum, 1994), 11.

[5] D. W. Smith, *Mission After Christendom* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2003), 25.

[6] D. J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, American Society of Missiology Series (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 330.

[7] See, for example, P. G. Hiebert, "The Flaw of the Excluded Middle," *Missiology* 10, no. 1 (1982): 35–47.

1.2. The Situation Today

1.2.1. Religion

Over the last fifty years the religious profile of the world has changed dramatically; what Andrew Walls calls the Christian centre of gravity has shifted from the West to Africa, Asia, and Latin America.[8]

Philip Jenkins describes this change:

> Already today, the largest Christian communities on the planet are to be found in Africa and Latin America. If we want to visualize a "typical" contemporary Christian, we should think of a woman living in a village in Nigeria or in a Brazilian favela.[9]

Comparing trends in Uganda and the United Kingdom gives an indication of the process which is underway. Christianity only took root in Uganda around 150 years ago, yet today 75% of the population would describe themselves as Christian.[10] By contrast, in 2005 a Manchester University study showed that only 50% of British Christian parents succeeded in passing on their faith to their children,[11] whilst a report by Peter Brierly suggests that the membership of Christian denominations in the UK will fall to under 5% by 2040, compared to just under 10% in 2005.[12]

Sanneh sums up the cumulative effect of these two trends:

> By 1985 there were over 16,500 conversions a day (in Africa), yielding an annual rate of over 6 million. In the same period some 4,300 people were leaving the Church on a daily basis in Europe and North America.[13]

The different experiences of the Church in the West and elsewhere have led to a change in the profile of Christians around the world. In 1800, well over 90% of Christians lived in Europe and North America, whereas in 1990 over 60% lived in Africa, South America, Asia, and the Pacific, with that proportion increasing each year.[14]

Evangelical mission agencies that were originally founded to take the gospel to Asia and Africa now live in a context where there is often a higher proportion of Christians on the "mission fields" than in the traditional sending countries.

There is a growing disparity between the worldviews of the growing world church and that of the mission sending churches. The southern churches tend to be

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[8] Andrew F. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission and Appropriation of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002), 31.

[9] Peter Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 2.

[10] Jenkins, *The Next Christendom*, 91.

[11] *Daily Telegraph* (17 August 2005).

[12] *Daily Telegraph* (3 September 2005).

[13] Lamin O. Sanneh, *Whose Religion Is Christianity? : the Gospel Beyond the West* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 15.

[14] Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process*, 31.

spiritually vibrant, expecting God to intervene in situations, where their northern counterparts would look for rationale, scientific causes and solutions.[15]

There is a danger that the increasingly Christian South will define itself against what they see as the secular and overly liberal North and that this could lead to a new fracture in the church.[16] We may already be seeing this demonstrated in the diversity of attitudes to homosexuality within the Anglican Communion.

1.2.2. Politics

Since the Second World War, virtually every country that was once part of the British Empire has been granted independence, fundamentally altering the relationship between the UK and its former colonies.

The relationship between missionaries and local Christians has also shifted. It should no longer be assumed that missionaries will be in charge; they have to learn to work under the direction of local Christian leaders.

In the UK, the move away from Empire has been attended by a growth in post-colonial guilt which itself has an impact on mission work. Proselytising mission, which encourages people to change their religious allegiance to Christianity is no longer seen as appropriate in the contemporary world.[17] Lamin Sanneh recounts the story of a British Methodist missionary who discouraged him from converting from Islam to Christianity.[18] Evangelical theologian Steve Holmes has demonstrated that societal criticisms of mission are having a growing impact on the way in which church congregations perceive mission agencies and their work.[19] Paul Hildreth draws attention to the paradoxical situation where churches in the UK are increasingly interested in mission to Muslims, but feel constrained by political correctness as to what they can say.[20]

At the same time, there is active hostility in the wider secular media towards the work of Christian mission. This can be seen in the comments pages of newspapers or in major publications such as Norman Lewis' *The Missionaries* (Lewis 1988).[21]

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[15] D. W. Smith, *Against the Stream: Christianity and Mission in an Age of Globalization* (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 2003), 19.

[16] Smith, *Against the Stream*, 23. See also, Jenkins, The Next Christendom, 107-108.

[17] Kirsteen Kim, *Joining in with the Spirit: Connecting World Church and Local Mission* (London: Epworth, 2009), 11.

[18] Smith, *Mission after Christendom*, 10.

[19] Steve Holmes, "'A Love I seem to Lose with my Lost Saints': Mission and Evangelical Identity," http://steverholmes.org.uk/blog/?p=7261 (accessed 11 April 2016).

[20] Paul Hildreth, "UK to Global Mission: What Is Really Going on? A Strategic Review for Global Connections," Global Connections, http://www.globalconnections.org.uk/sites/newgc.localhost/files/papers/GCSR2011%20Summary.pdf (accessed 13 August 2015).

[21] See, for example, the response to my article in the Guardian: http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2011/dec/20/bible-translation-ivorian-village?commentpage=9#start-of-comments (accessed 11 April 2016). Norman Lewis, *The Missionaries* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1988).

It is, perhaps, significant that in 2011 a major survey of the beliefs and habits of evangelical Christians in the UK made no reference to overseas mission.[22]

1.2.3. Globalisation

Globalisation is the spread of western economic progress and influence through the world in particular through information technology. "It has beneficial potential but also has been the source of a consumer society in the West, a growing gap between rich and poor, ecological destruction, a massive displacement of peoples, and a homogenising force imposing the spirit of Western culture on the cultures of the world."[23] Christian mission has always been carried out within a given context. However, the impact of globalisation is that there is now no such thing as a purely local context. Every situation in the world is informed by the larger global context.[24]

The long held distinction between "home" missions and "foreign" missions or the "mission field" is becoming increasingly redundant in a globalised world. While we will continue to refer to these terms in this paper, this is a convenience that allows us to avoid lengthy explanations, rather than a reflection of the current situation.

1.2.4. Rapid Change

We are living through a period of massive change: the world is increasingly urbanised, communication technology is evolving at a rapid rate, while the economic balance of the world is shifting. The population in Europe and Japan is ageing, while in Africa and other parts of Asia the population is growing at an explosive rate. Across the globe, huge numbers of people are moving to avoid conflict or simply to improve their standards of living. One result of these trends is a huge shift in population towards urban centres and away from rural areas.[25] We are living through these changes today and it is difficult to predict what their impact will be on the future of mission agencies. One thing is clear, however: agencies that wish to respond to these changes will need to be very flexible.[26]

1.2.5. UK Trends

We have noted that the church has grown enormously in recent decades across the globe. However, the growth in the world population more or less matches the growth in the church, such that the number of Christians as a percentage of the world population has hardly changed.[27] Therefore the need for evangelistic mission to reach people who have no opportunity to hear about Jesus is as crucial as it ever was.

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[22] "21st Century Evangelicals: A Snapshot," Evangelical Alliance, http://www.eauk.org/church/resources/snapshot/21st-century-evangelicals.cfm (accessed 11 April 2016).

[23] Michael W. Goheen, *Introducing Christian Mission Today: Scripture, History and Issues* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2014): 21.

[24] Timothy C. Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions: A Trinitarian Missiology for the Twenty-First Century* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2010), 42.

[25] Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions*, 42.

[26] Kirk J. Franklin, "A Paradigm for Global Mission Leadership," ed. C J P Niemandt (2015), 17.

[27] "Global Christianity: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Christian Population," Pew Research Center, http://www.pewforum.org/2011/12/19/global-christianity-exec/ (accessed 11 April 2016).

However, in the UK at least, there is concern that churches and mission agencies are losing their focus on evangelistic mission. In 1974, the Lausanne Covenant helped evangelicals to recapture the importance of social action as an integral part of mission work.[28] However, in the intervening years, the pendulum appears to have swung in the other direction to such an extent that evangelistic proclamation is being sidelined by concerns for climate change, the relief of poverty, and justice.[29] In September 2015, Martin Lee of Global Connections wrote: "The evangelical church has lost its desire to help people come to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, happy with just social action and doing good."[30]

At the same time an increasing number of churches and denominations are engaging in mission without the intermediary of mission agencies.[31] Sometimes this simply involves a partnership with a project, church or diocese in another part of the world, while in some cases churches are directly involved in church planting across the globe.[32]

1.2.5.1. Agency Numbers

Given the tensions that we have mentioned (the decline in the church in the West, the ambivalence towards mission and the growth in churches not working with agencies) it would be logical to assume that the number of agencies in the UK would be declining. However, the opposite is actually true. This graph compares the number of mission agencies who are members of Global Connections with the weekly attendance at Anglican churches in the UK.

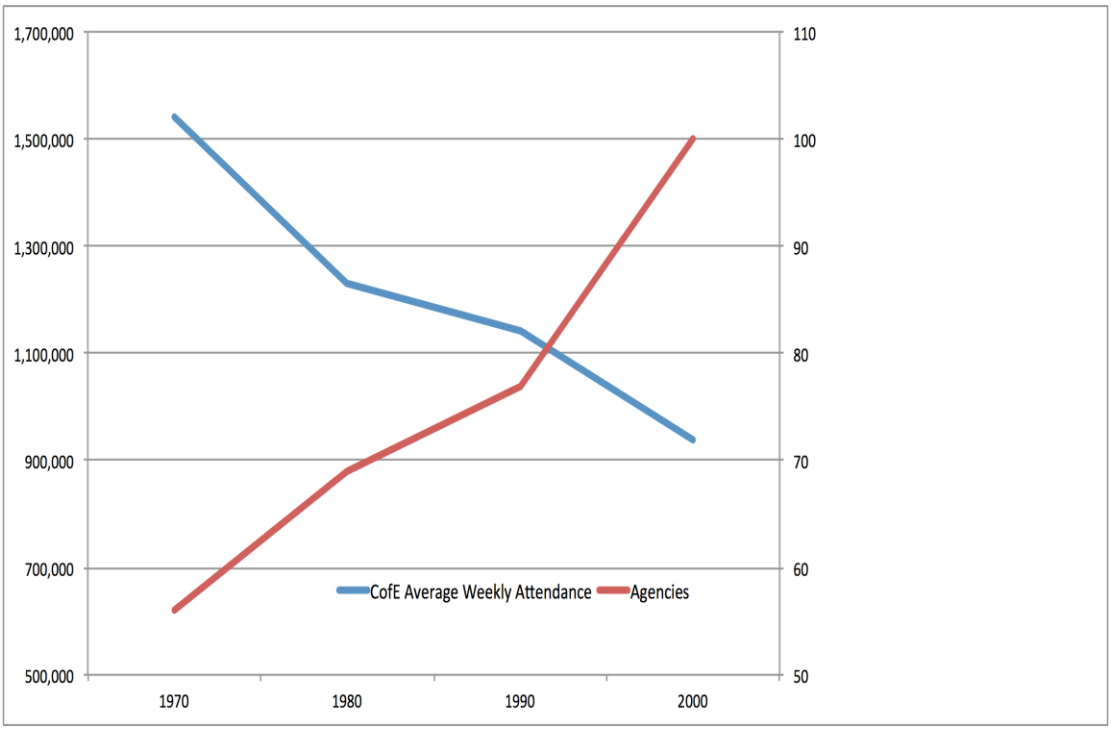
[28] John R. W. Stott, *Making Christ Known : Historic Mission Documents From the Lausanne Movement, 1974-1989* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

[29] Hildreth, "UK to Global Mission."

[30] Martin Lee, "Integral Mission: an Analysis," paper presented at the Global Connections Council, London, 2015.

[31] Ted Ward, "Repositioning Mission Agencies for the Twenty-First Century," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 23, no. 4 (October 1999): 146–153.

[32] David Devenish, *What on Earth Is the Church for: a Blueprint for the Future of Church Based Mission and Social Action* (Milton Keynes: Authentic Media, 2005).



It is possible to argue that the Church of England figures are not entirely representative of the Evangelical Church in the UK. However, they are broadly illustrative of a trend. Ultimately, there are more and more agencies seeking support from a shrinking constituency. This is not sustainable even in the short to mid-term.

1.2.6. Missionaries Today

It would be wrong to assume from the preceding discussion that there is no place for missionaries in the church today. We can identify three key roles for missionaries in the contemporary situation:

1. Taking the Christian message to people who have not yet heard the message of Christ.
2. Serving the church through technical skills and providing training.
3. Encouraging and teaching the church by virtue of experiences gathered in very different cultural contexts.

However, the majority of these missionaries will not be westerners and they are unlikely to be dependent on Western structures for their work.[33]

[33] However, as long as there are some Western missionaries, there will still be a place for some sort of administrative agencies. For example, one significant contribution of the agencies is in terms of "economies of scale". By sending financial support to numerous missionaries, they are also able to benefit from advantageous exchange rates and bank transfer charges. Not only that, but as government regulation on the transfer of funds overseas becomes ever tighter, mission agencies are able to deal with the complexity involved on a broad scale. The overhead involved for a church supporting one missionary overseas is significant and likely to increase. This seems to indicate that there may be a continuing role for agencies in the future, even if their number is reduced.

1.3. Summary

This introduction has demonstrated that the world in which evangelical mission agencies operate has changed dramatically over the last fifty years or so. David Smith describes the impact of these changes in stark terms:

> What is clear by now is that both the concept of mission as a one-way movement from Christendom to the un-evangelised world, and the structures devised at the close of the eighteenth century to facilitate that movement, have been overtaken by historical developments that render them increasingly irrelevant and redundant.[34]

At the same time as agencies confront questions about their purpose and structure, they are faced with the challenge of raising support from a church that is both in decline and apparently less interested in overseas mission work than in previous generations and for whom the focus of mission has often shifted to the UK.[35]

2. Current Approaches

In response to these issues, British mission agencies have made some changes to the way in which they operate. These can be broken down into two broad categories: tweaking and reforming.

2.1. Tweaking

Some agencies, in particular the larger ones that are less threatened by the current situation, are responding by improving their managerial processes, making their communications and fund-raising sharper, and adapting their funding models to meet current challenges. These tweaks are well intentioned and often demonstrate good stewardship. However, they do not reflect the extent to which the operating environment has changed for mission agencies and are unlikely to be successful long-term.

Paul Hildreth, in his report on mission agencies, referred to this approach as "operating within the model."[36]

2.2. Reforming

Hildreth's suggested alternative is to reform the model: for agencies to find ways of deploying their workforce which reflect the current realities of the world. It is generally the medium-sized and smaller agencies that are following these strategies. They are more threatened by the changes in the world, but also have a flexibility to change and adapt which may not be present among some of the larger agencies. The following section illustrates some of the approaches which are being adopted.

2.2.1. Diaspora Mission

Typically, mission agencies have built up expertise and experience in working with people from particular languages and cultures. This was done by sending missionaries to the regions where those languages and cultures were indigenous. Today, however, in a very mobile world, people from a wide array of languages and

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[34] Smith, *Mission After Christendom*, 116.

[35] Kim, *Joining in with the Spirit*, 13.

[36] Hildreth, "UK to Global Mission."

cultures are found in most major towns and cities in the West. It is suggested that one future role of mission agencies would be to reach these diaspora communities.

There are various aspects to diaspora ministry that we need to mention.

The first, and perhaps most obvious, is reaching settled immigrant communities with the Christian gospel. For example, there are missionaries with experience in the Indian Sub-Continent now working with Indian churches and mission groups in cities across the UK. The work they do in Britain is very similar to that which they did in India, but without the need to travel half way across the world. There are a number of other communities in the UK which can be reached in this way.

Equally, there are more transient diaspora communities in the business and student worlds, where the expertise and experience of cross-cultural mission agencies could be of use. Reaching these transient communities is strategically important, as the visitors to the West will one day return to their own countries, perhaps taking the gospel to places where expat missionaries find it very difficult to work.

Ministry to refugees and asylum seekers in the West is an area of growing interest, possibilities, and concerns. Many churches are concerned for the refugee populations which are moving into their cities, but have no idea how best to serve them. Mission agencies may well be able to provide support and help in this area.

Diaspora ministry is complex and the avenues for involvement are expanding.[37] It is undoubtedly the case that churches in the West will require support and advice as they seek to minister to the growing international communities in their midst. The challenge for mission agencies is to learn how to work alongside churches, supporting but not supplanting them.

2.2.2. Mission to the West

As the church grows and develops in the majority world and shrinks in the West, mission is no longer unidirectional. Of particular relevance to us in this context is the flow of missionaries from former mission fields to the UK and other Western nations. A number of mission agencies, for example Latin Link, are sponsoring missionaries to plant churches amongst the indigenous British population. Harvey Kwiyani refers to this phenomenon as "the blessed reflex."[38]

It could be argued that there is no need for mission agencies to be involved in this movement. There are many Christians and Christian leaders who are migrating to the West, particularly from Africa, as part of a general economic movement. These communities are planting churches where they settle. There are now many African churches in London and it has been suggested that African church-goers outnumber

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[37] Alternative aspects diaspora ministry can be illustrated from the work of Wycliffe Bible Translators in the UK. Wycliffe Korea has sent a couple to England to recruit Koreans as translators. They work among Korean churches in the UK with the aim of mobilising people to join Wycliffe Korea at some point. The idea is that Christians who have lived in a cross-cultural environment will be more willing and prepared to work as missionaries than those who have never left their home culture. Another initiative involves British translation teams working with the diaspora Christians to translate the Scriptures for language communities in regions where it would be very difficult to do translation and literacy work. However, while these approaches may appear radical on the surface, in reality they are simply carrying on Wycliffe's traditional ministry in a slightly different setting.

[38] Harvey C. Kwiyani, *Sent Forth* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2014).

British ones in the city. However, these African churches are having a limited impact on the British population.

2.2.3. Training the Church in the Home Country

Another channel for involvement is training churches in the home country in cross-cultural ministry. Interserve offers a number of courses which aim to train British Christians in how to reach out to their Muslim neighbours. As the UK, and the West in general, grows more multicultural, it is clear that this sort of training will become increasingly necessary. However, it is obvious that there are far more agencies which could potentially offer training than are ever likely to be needed within the UK context.[39]

2.2.4. Moving to a Consultancy Model

Bryan Knell suggests that mission agencies need to encourage churches to take over the role that the agencies once adopted, while agencies, themselves, become consulting and advisory bodies to support churches in their mission work.[40] However, this ignores the practical and administrative services that agencies can offer in supporting workers overseas.

On a more practical, though anecdotal, note, there is very little obvious evidence of churches using the consultancy services that agencies are already providing.

Another pragmatic issue is the general unwillingness of churches in the UK to engage directly with mission to the unreached overseas. Though there are some honourable exceptions, most churches in Britain who take direct responsibility for mission, or who engage in overseas partnerships, tend to work in East Africa, in situations where English can be used and where there is already a significant Christian presence. If agencies are to transfer much of what they do to churches, there will need to be a significant development in the British Church's vision for mission. There is currently no obvious sign of this happening.

2.3. Where Does This Leave Us?

All of these suggestions have been adopted in one way or another by mission agencies in the UK, but all of these approaches have significant problems in common.

In the introduction we noted the unsustainable situation of having an increasing number of mission agencies, coupled with a falling church attendance. None of these approaches addresses this issue; indeed, some of them exacerbate it. If mission agencies are to make the shift from being sending agencies to acting as consultancies to churches, then there would be a need for significantly fewer agencies than exist today.

Another issue is that each of these suggestions depends on the church, either as a local congregation or a denomination, taking a particular course of action in order to make use of the services that the agency provides. Anecdotally, there is not a great deal of evidence to suggest that churches are using agencies in this way.

The steps that agencies have taken to meet the changing situation are simply not radical enough. However, Hildreth suggests that agencies are unlikely to adopt truly

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[39] Raymond Porter, "Mission Impossible," *Commentary* (December 2015).

[40] Bryan Knell, *The Heart of Church and Mission* (Nürnberg: VTR, 2015).

radical solutions until they experience a greater degree of stress than they do at the moment.[41]

In the following section, we will explore some of the issues that would need to be addressed in order for agencies to make radical changes to the way in which they work. A first step is briefly to explore the legitimacy of agencies as separate structures in the first place.

3. Whose Problem Is It Anyway?

3.1. Legitimacy of Agencies

Up to this point, we have taken the existence of mission agencies as a given without questioning their validity. However, there are some ambiguities about the nature of agencies which need to be briefly examined before we can proceed any further.

The Lausanne Covenant is positive about the existence of specialist agencies:

"We also thank God for agencies which labor in Bible translation, theological education, the mass media, Christian literature, evangelism, missions, church renewal and other specialist fields."

As we mentioned in the introduction, Winter rationalises the existence of agencies by suggesting that the church globally and historically has always had two types of structure; the sodalities (the voluntary orders) and modalities (the local congregations or churches).[42]

Winter's case, however, is not universally accepted. Schnable, for example, argues that Winter's sociological explanation for church and mission structures has no biblical validity.[43]

Perhaps a more useful approach is adopted by a number of authors who, rather than getting tied up in details of the legitimacy of agencies, seek to deal with them on pragmatic grounds.

> Missionary societies as we know them today, are in no sense a necessary part of the existence of the church; they are simply a temporary expedient for the performance of certain functions that could be performed in different ways.[44]
>
> Their only theological rationale is in the service they can give to the Churches, fulfilling those tasks which the Churches see as necessary but which they do not have the resources on a local level to accomplish. Their main objective should be to facilitate co-operation between local churches and across denominational boundaries. They may provide opportunities for fellowship, worship, teaching, evangelism and service,

[41] Hildreth, "UK to Global Mission."

[42] Winter, "The Two Structures of God's Redemptive Mission."

[43] Eckhard J. Schnable, *Early Christian Mission, Vol. 2, Paul and the Early Church* (Downers Grove: IVP and Leicester: Apollos, 2004), 1578-9.

[44] Stephen Neill, *Creative Tension* (London: Edinburgh House, 1959), 82.

> acting as catalysts and giving encouragement, but never trying to be substitutes for the Churches.[45]
>
> The concept of voluntary societies, as a parallel structure for mission, was not a theological conviction—it was a practical necessity.[46]

The role of the agency, then, is to serve as a specialist arm of the church, doing things that the church sees as necessary, but which require a degree of specialisation or international reach which the local church cannot achieve. However, this implies that the agencies need to listen to the churches and to be, in some fashion, directed by them. For various reasons, this has not always happened.

Again, Neill makes a strong point:

> It was the failure of the churches to develop a missionary sense that drove certain missionary societies to adopt positions and policies which were unrelated to anything in the New Testament, and then subsequently to attempt to work out a theological rationale for that which in itself is theologically indefensible.[47]

Nevertheless, not all positions and policies adopted by mission agencies are "theologically indefensible."

> Undoubtedly, members of the Church have sometimes unnecessarily succumbed to the entrepreneurial spirit of the age, initiating projects, and founding institutions and organisations which have been detrimental to mission rather than furthering it. On the other hand, where the Church at large is clearly failing to fulfil its mission vocation responsibly and with dedication, initiatives by groups of Christians in obedience to the Gospel seem to be perfectly in order.[48]

However, these occasions when the church fails in its vocation should be seen as the exceptions, rather than taken as the norm. Even when agencies perceive that the church is not fulfilling its missional calling, the agency should not simply step into the breach, but should work in dialogue providing both a model and an encouragement for the church.

When a missionary is sent by one of thousands of missions, there is still the need for a local church to be the primary sending body, since mission is the work of the church—the church universal, through a local, particular church.[49]

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[45] J. Andrew Kirk, *What Is Mission: Theological Explorations* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1999), 199.

[46] Scott W. Sunquist, *Understanding Christian Mission* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013).

[47] Neill, *Creative Tension*, 84.

[48] Kirk, *What Is Mission*, 199.

[49] See Sunquist, *Understanding Christian Mission*.

The importance of a missionary being sent out by a local church raises two issues which are not central to this paper, but which deserve mention in passing.

It is incumbent on mission agencies to ensure that their candidates and staff are integrated into a church both in their home country and, where circumstances allow, on the field. It is unfortunately, a fact of economic necessity that many missionaries have a number of supporting churches from whom they receive financial and prayer support. However, agencies should not accept candidates who are not members of a specific church and responsible to the leadership of that church. In some senses, the

3.2. Working with home country churches

The contents of this and the following section will inevitably simplify the rather complex situation faced by agencies at the present time. However, one central principle needs to be retained. The future role of mission agencies must be determined in dialogue with the churches to whom the agencies are responsible.

In considering the relationship between mission agency and the church, it is convenient to identify three types of agencies.

- Denominational Agencies such as the Baptist Missionary Society and the Anglican Church Missionary Society have some sort of link into a denominational structure which provides (at least in theory) for clear communication and accountability. To some extent, Protestant denominational agencies can be considered as homologues to the Catholic Orders which are linked in one way or another into the broader church structure.
- There are also a number of smaller agencies that have close links with a limited number of churches; often those churches which the founder of the agency attended. These agencies, if they are so inclined, are in a position to seek advice and input regarding their future from the churches to which they are accountable.
- However, these two types of agency represent a minority both in terms of the number of agencies as well as the number of missionaries sent from the UK. The faith missions such as OMF, Wycliffe Bible Translators, and Interserve represent a much more complex situation. These organisations tend to have links with a huge number of individual churches, but much weaker links with denominational or inter-church structures. This means that it is very difficult to establish any meaningful communication between churches and the agencies regarding the agencies' future.

Typically, the board of trustees has been the mechanism by which churches have been able to have an input into the work and future plans of agencies. Over the years, most mission agencies have appointed a number of clergy to their boards, who although they had no official representative status, could provide advice and guidance from the point of view of their churches. However, over the past few years, British charity legislation has become more complex and boards of trustees have to deal with a complex legal and financial environment. Because of this, there is less time available in board meetings for discussion of mission strategy and agencies are also having to seek board members from legal, accounting, and other professional backgrounds.

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role of the mission agency is an agglomeration of the roles of the missionaries who belong to that agency and it is vitally important that there are clear lines of communication between agencies, their missionaries and the churches that have commissioned them for the specific missionary.

The second issue is the one of duplication. There are literally hundreds of Christian agencies in the UK, many of them doing very similar work in identical situations. This makes it very difficult for churches to know how best to support the work they are doing or to have any meaningful input into it.

Equally, the fragmentation of British evangelicalism into a number of different "tribes"[50] makes it difficult, if not impossible for agencies to have boards which represent the full spectrum of evangelicalism.

The proliferation of mission agencies is also a problem at this point. To the insider, the various agencies have different purposes and characters, but to a busy church leader, they look very much alike and it is impossible to engage with all of them.

There is, perhaps, a need for a national dialogue, which involves leaders from a range of church backgrounds as well as a number of agencies to consider the future shape of mission support and involvement from the UK.

3.3. Working with Field Churches

On the surface, seeking advice and input from churches on "the field" is simpler than the situation in the "home country." Whereas agencies may have to relate to multiple churches at home, they will, with a few exceptions, relate to only one or two denominations on the field and they may well have direct organisational links to that denomination.

However, there are two significant issues that can impact on the quality of dialogue; the first is the quality of the partnership between mission and church and the second concerns the future direction of the church across the world.

> Partnership is a wonderful idea; pity about the practice! Truly equal sharing will remain problematic across the world Church as long as material resources are so unevenly owned. All too often Western Churches and mission agencies use either financial inducements or veiled threats of withdrawal to promote their own concepts of mission and evangelism, church growth, development and social struggle. Sometimes a cloak of respectability is given to Western programmes and strategies by ensuring that indigenous leadership from the Third World has a high profile. Yet the most important decision-making and long-term planning are still done outside the situation.[51]

This issue of the relationship between agencies and the churches that they have helped to found has been of concern since the days of Henry Venn. However, if agencies are to discover their future role, then they will need to find ways to facilitate honest, open, and unbiased dialogue with their partners in the countries where they work.[52]

This dialogue needs to take into account the basic change in the nature of the church that we highlighted in the introduction: that is, the fact that the majority of Christians now live in the continents of the South and East, not the Western home of mission agencies.

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[50] In an unpublished 2010 paper, Peter Broadbent, Bishop of Willesden, identified seven distinct "tribes" within British Evangelicalism which cut across denominational boundaries.

[51] Kirk, *What Is Mission*, 192.

[52] Porter, "Mission Impossible."

Hanciles highlights this point: "there can be little doubt that the future of global Christianity is now inextricably bound up with non-Western initiatives and developments. This is supremely applicable to missionary enterprise."[53]

In the light of this, Hanciles suggests that there are a number of issues which need to be addressed:

- The preponderance of American/Western concepts which dominate approaches to mission. These include short-term missions ("many of which amount to little more than Christian tourism with a touch of scheduled humanitarianism") and terms such as "unreached peoples" and "the 10/40 Window" ("both of which reflect Western mapping of the world and ignore the living witness of Christians residing in non-Western contexts").
- Western missionary action and thinking reflects over-dependence on material resources and confuses quantifiable measures of growth or human development with missionary success.
- There is a need to rethink our understanding of Christian mission, but the current structures may be too entrenched to allow this thinking to take place.

Hanciles concludes his argument thus:

> The main problem is that Western missiologists are stuck with definitions, models, and instruments of measurement associated with Western operations and ill-suited for evaluation of new non-Western initiatives. For starters, the term "missionary" is generally linked with "command and go structures" and is typically applied to individuals "sent" by an organisation to a foreign country (usually outside the West). The initiatives, movements, and sheer numbers involved in the non-Western missionary movement are of a scale and magnitude that defy statistical analysis; nor are they driven by the results-orientated calculations with which the American missionary movement is notoriously obsessed. The reasons are not hard to find: Non-Western initiatives are disconnected from structures of domination and control, freed from the bane of triumphalism (and the militant aggression associated with it), less resource-dependent/-oriented, and bereft of territorial understanding of mission. But these developments hint at something far more significant. The new "centre" is radically different and failure to appreciate this fact impoverishes our understanding of its profound historical implications.[54]

Hanciles' point is that the shift in the centre of gravity of the church is not just a numerical issue, it is also a conceptual and theological one and mission agencies need to take this into account.

4. Conclusion

British mission agencies face a twin problem: the decline of the church in the UK is undermining their support base (at a time when the number of agencies is still

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[53] Jehu J. Hanciles, *Beyond Christendom* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008), 382.

[54] Hanciles, *Beyond Christendom*, 384.

increasing) and their *raison d'être* is called into question by the growth of the church worldwide.

For the most part, agencies have reacted to their dramatically altered circumstances by effecting limited or incremental changes which do not reflect the Copernican nature of the transformation of the world church.[55]

If it is the role of agencies to support churches in their mission, and they are not serving churches, then the agencies no longer have a function. If the agencies fail to adapt adequately to a changing situation, then they should close.

Any future plans for agencies should be directed towards them helping to support churches across the world, not towards their own survival. In all likelihood, the number of mission agencies in the UK will start to decline in the next few years. Ideally, this should be done intelligently with an eye to preserving those functions which support the church. The fear is that financial or other pressures will cause agencies to fold without the opportunity to provide for the continuation of that which they do well.

In order to find their role for the future, agencies need to be in dialogue with churches in their sending countries and also with churches in the countries where they work. However, it is likely that churches in different contexts will have very different priorities. One simple example of this relates to the placement of missionaries. The Lausanne Covenant suggests that there are situations in which expatriate missionaries are a hindrance rather than a help to local mission:

> A reduction of foreign missionaries and money in an evangelised country may sometimes be necessary to facilitate the national church's growth in self-reliance and to release resources for unevangelised areas.[56]

The presence of foreign missionaries (and foreign funding) can stifle the growth of the church. Even so, a "sending church" may still wish to send a missionary into that

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[55] One agency which has undergone major change is the Wycliffe Global Alliance (formally Wycliffe Bible Translators International). In the 1990s, the various international divisions of Wycliffe Bible Translators, which were subsidiaries of Wycliffe US, became independent charities in their home countries. These Wycliffe Organisations were, for the most part, Western agencies which provided finance and personnel for Bible translation around the world. They were mirrored by National Bible Translation Organisations (NBTOs) who recruited local staff and received expats and finance from the Wycliffe Organisations worldwide. Over the last twenty years this structure has evolved such that the Wycliffe Global Alliance is now "a dynamic, interdependent community of diverse organizations, networks and movements in various stages of development, drawn together by God as participants in the Bible translation movement".

Kirk Franklin, CEO of the Wycliffe Global Alliance, lists some of the advantages of this transformation, they include: giving a greater voice to various partners in the global south (balancing the voice of the more mature and influential northern organisations), improved missiological reflection and the training of leaders for the Bible translation task. Franklin, "A Paradigm for Global Mission Leadership," 65.

The transformation that the Wycliffe Global Alliance has undergone is a valuable one. Yet there is little evidence that the changes were made in conjunction with or in order to serve the needs of the church. Internally, the Wycliffe Global Alliance is clearly much better structured for the work of Bible translation. However, it is not clear that this new formation will help the constituent organisations support the church in their mission.

[56] John R. W. Stott, "1974: the Lausanne Covenant, with an Exposition and Commentary," in *Making Christ Known*, 1–56.

situation. It could be that they "feel a call" to work in a specific country, or it could be they feel that by sending missionaries it will help their congregation to understand the needs of the world. Whatever the reasons, there is a potential clash between the interests of the sending and receiving churches.

Balancing these competing priorities and conceptions will be a major preoccupation for mission agencies in the future. This will not be easy. For the most part, agencies are dependent on churches in the West for their personnel and finances, but as Hanciles has demonstrated, the way in which the new, growing churches of the South conceive of mission can be very different to their Western counterparts. Finding a way to serve the growing Southern church, while not alienating those in the West who provide resources is likely to be extremely difficult. However, agencies must avoid, at all costs, imposing a Western agenda on other churches simply because the West is in possession of more financial resources.

Nevertheless, although this represents a significant challenge, it also opens up the possibility of an important new role for mission agencies: stimulating dialogue between the churches of the West and the rest of the world.

The World Council of Churches emerged from the 1910 Edinburgh Missionary Conference and while evangelicals may suggest that the WCC has lost its way theologically, it is clear that mission is a theme which can serve to draw Christians and churches together. International Denominations, such as the Anglican Community, are able to create links between churches and diocese around the world. However, mission agencies, with their breadth of church affiliations, are in a position to facilitate much broader dialogue than can be achieved within a denominational structure. This is not to suggest recreating a large conference or organisation along the lines of the WCC or the Lausanne Movement; those structures exist already, though it could be argued that they have little effect at a grassroots level.[57] However, agencies, with their grassroots contacts, will have a key role in the future in finding ways for exchange, communication, and shared mission between churches in very different parts of the world.

[57] Daryll Jackson, "Love of God, Love of Neighbour," in *The Mission of God*, ed. Mark Oxbrow and Tim Grass, (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2015), 31.