

Mustard-sized agencies

by Justin Long

Most of the time, we hear about the big agencies—groups like YWAM, Campus Crusade, Operation Mobilization, the International Mission Board, Wycliffe, World Vision, etc. We often hear about what I would call moderately large agencies: New Tribes Mission, WEC International, Pioneers, etc.

One of the reasons that I have a great deal of hope for the future, however, is neither the ‘big’s nor the ‘mediums’ but rather the ‘small’s and the ‘tinies.’ Many of these agencies have never been heard of. Some are just a small non-profit corporate covering for a single person’s ministry.

How many of us have ever heard of the Afghan Border Crusade? (I just have a name mentioned in correspondence—no official contact.) Or Operation Reveille, which has been doing chaplaincy-related work among military personnel for as long as I can remember? Or Joshua Project, which is just a group of 3 who’ve been doing peoples-related research for—has it been a decade? ChinaSource and China Harvest are both smallish agencies (in terms of manpower) and yet have made a significant impact.

The reason that small agencies make me hopeful is *passion*. Someone cared about the vision they believed in: enough that when no agency would take them or let them do precisely what they felt called to do, they started their own. Granted, there are a fair number of independent-minded (read: stubborn) types. Nevertheless if you didn’t believe in your cause, you generally wouldn’t start your own mission agency. There are easier jobs to take and not believe in.

Well, that’s not the only thing that makes me hopeful. The second thing is the increasing connectivity around the world. In 1995, when I began working with the *World Christian Encyclopedia* as a programmer and analyst, very few denominations or big agencies had websites. By 2000, when I went to work with the Network for Strategic Missions to create the website strategicnetwork.org, most of the big agencies (and many of the mediums and smalls) had websites, but many were not well done.

Now, eight years later (and in our fourth year of living overseas), I can’t think of a single large or medium mission force that doesn’t have a website. Most conferences now feature workshops on e-mail security, website development, and the like. The Internet has had a game-changing impact on how missions is administered and how mission strategies are implemented around the world. While in some cases this has led to a “shortening” of missions (see

my Reality Check in this issue), it also has led to the superempowerment of individuals. A single individual with decent web access in many restricted access nations of the world can have access to mission resources that beggar

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the imagination. But more than these resources, that same individual can have unimagined connectivity to other people—donors, prospective coworkers, advisers, and the like. Instead of having to create massive agencies in order to benefit from the economies of scale, we can now create massive numbers of tiny agencies highly networked together, and benefit both from really useful economies of scale (aggregation of knowledge, and in some cases things like health insurance, medical care, continuing education, etc) and from useful economies of tinyness.

Many books have been emerging on this idea. It has applications to many fields: business, science, government—as well as missions. It excites me because mission agencies sit right at the convergence point between connectedness and passion.

However, to take advantage of this convergence point means we must change the way in which we function. This is a third thing that gives me a lot of hope for the future. In the past, missions has been on occasion a truly lonely enterprise. I’m not saying that we will eradicate loneliness entirely in the future. There are many, and probably will continue to be, many lonely fields. But as connectedness becomes more pervasive, *alliances*, *friendships*, and *co-working* will become the norm.

The day of the isolated missionary working on his (or her) own in the ‘outback’ regions will pass. We will need to function in a team mode, even with people who are not part of our organization. And that excites me, because Jesus said the world will know we are his followers by the love we have for each other. As we get to demonstrate that more and more, I think the best is yet to come.

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