

CHALLENGES FACING A TRADITIONAL WESTERN NATIONAL MISSION MOVEMENT

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Global Connections (UK) is one of the oldest national mission movements having been originally founded in 1941. Back then under the name the Evangelical Missionary Alliance, it was very successful in bringing together for fellowship leaders in the various agencies. As times changed, it changed too, setting up a variety of opportunities for people to meet and do things together at different levels. It ran successful conferences and forums, and could be considered a success.

For the UK, the second half of the last century was a time of ‘modernism.’ Society was control dominated, structure and committees pre-dominated. Everything was tidy and straightforward. Within the church, there was a clear division between ministry and missionary, home and overseas, the senders and receivers, the domain of the Evangelical Alliance and that of the Evangelical Missionary Alliance. The mission community comprised of enthusiastic lobbyists for world mission but were often on the edge of the church. Their message was predictable, they were considered rather a bore and their enthusiasm tended to result in UK-focussed churches just feeling guilty.

We now live in a very different world. Even by the late 1980s, the UK mission community was beginning to find ways to help churches in new ways, though there had to be an almost clandestine approach through groups such as ‘InterAction.’ By the end of the 1990s, it was realised that the UK (country, church and missions) faced a whole new variety of issues and challenges. Some were internal, others external. Some were good, some not so good, or even bad. Some were within the control of the network’s members, others outside our control.

There was a breaking down of the divisions of the past. Post-modernism and globalisation were having a major impact. Churches were involved in Europe and elsewhere, without consulting the ‘world mission’ constituency. Mission groups who only worked over there, were establishing ministries in the UK and the clear dividing line between the responsibilities of the EA and the EMA was becoming much fuzzier. Globalisation has meant many people who weren’t interested before can now dabble in mission without experience, cultural awareness or training.

Change was needed within the mission community as we have struggled to come to grips with the many new influences and the changing circumstances. Understanding both the external environment and internal influences in the national church are vitally important. All too often we make our future plans at best only looking at the present, and sadly often based on the certainties of the past. It is impossible to list all the influences and issues that were and are being faced, but an attempt at a quick overview of some of the major ones as they affect the UK (and I suspect other Western countries) is provided in the appendix at the end.

So how has Global Connections needed to change to address some of these issues – and how will it need to change in the future?

HIGHLIGHTING MAJOR CHANGES AND INITIATIVES UNDERTAKEN

There are probably three major initiatives that I would like to highlight, Firstly a change of mindset to look to the future, rather than the past, was a major factor in changes that have taken place. Global Connections had always been good at helping stretch the thinking and practice of members but maybe hadn't taken so seriously the changes that were needed within our own vision and structure. One helpful factor in changing the mindset was the appointment of younger people into key roles – an Associate Director (and now a Strategic Development Manager) to stretch the network's thinking. There is a vast difference between the mindset of the younger and older generations and Global Connections needed to take younger people seriously if it was going to position itself for the future, rather than just the here and now (and in reality the past).

The second major element was the change of name from the Evangelical Missionary Alliance to Global Connections. This was more than a cosmetic exercise, but a real attempt to acknowledge we were at a crossroads and could not go on as before. The ongoing challenge is making the name change a reality and becoming a true network, committed to linking, mutual relationship, supporting each other and widening the network.

Thirdly in 1999 we appointed a Church Relations Director with the support of the Evangelical Alliance. At the same time, UK Churches were welcomed as Church Associates. This move was strongly resisted by some agency members. For them the division between church and agency was helpful and they rightly recognised that the blurring of responsibilities would bring additional problems and tensions for the already financially-stretched agencies. In 2004, Global Connections held its first conference with a significant representation (25%) of UK church leaders. A number of other events bringing church and agency leaders together demonstrated some of the misunderstanding that existed. Following further consultation about governance and other issues, during 2005 churches were invited into full membership rather than the second class status of associates and began to financially contribute, on the same basis as agencies but with their own financial bands. A lot more needs to be done in this area, for example involving many more church personnel in Global Connections events that have traditionally been organised to suit agency staff. However we believe that the more we can bring these churches and agencies together to share and integrate the work of mission the healthier the church will be and the more effective the work of mission.

There were many more changes and a summary of most of the major ones is listed here

- Actively seeking to understand the world as it now is including the appointment of young people into key roles to stretch the network's thinking
- Changing the name to demonstrate that we were at a crossroads and could not go on as before, and intentionally becomes a looser network, with a more open membership, rather than an alliance or mission agency club. Development of informal links and new ways of working, rather than just formal structures
- Establishing the process of churches becoming a full part of the network
- Developing a clear vision to see "Mission at the heart of the church, the church at the heart of mission"
- Encouraging debate about the role of the church in mission (both local and denominations or streams) and that mission cannot be the domain of agencies alone

- Encouraging debate about the breadth of what mission is – in terms of where it takes place as well as its content
- Trying to make the network less dependent on the fees charged to agencies
- Developing a clear strategy based around the six functions of networking, developing missional church, raising standards, debating key mission issues, support services and representation
- Investing in a major way in the website (first established in 2000 and completely revised and redesigned in 2006) to provide links, conversations, information and resources
- Redesigning the communications and newsletter (again in 2000 and second revision in 2006) to make it more user-friendly and informative

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE?

So what next? In our changing world, continuing changes in national mission movements is inevitable. I am in the fortunate position that this is widely accepted within our network. That more change will take place is no longer an issue, but rather it is anticipating the future and putting in the right changes. In one sense the hard work has been done and I have inherited a strong basis for the future. Yet probably because of our changes we are more vulnerable than ever.

So what is still needed over the next few years. The major one for me is seeing our vision of “mission at the heart of the church, the church at the heart of mission” become the springboard from which all our activities and services are launched. We are not here to serve the agenda of agencies or any other group unless this is the basis of that service.

At lot more still needs to be done and some of the highlights for me are:

- Developing a real relationship with the EA in the UK around the centrality of mission and missional church
- Encouraging greater theological input and reflection on the basis for mission and how it is undertaken so we are less driven by pragmatism and our culture
- Helping agencies realise that if all they are interested in is their own survival and growth rather than the extension of the Kingdom of God, then we may as well give up now
- Ensuring that mission mobilisation is not simply about raising individuals to go with, give to or pray for a particular agency, but a change of mindset within the individual and more importantly the church community
- Helping the church in the UK to be truly missional and not so inward looking or just concentrating on survival, with a clear work plan for ensuring training colleges and major church events take mission seriously
- Making the name change a reality and continuing the process of becoming a true network, committed to linking, mutual relationship, supporting each other and continuing the process of churches becoming a full part of the network
- Building links with the black-majority (and other non ethnic British) churches and start to learn from and contribute to their involvement in global mission
- Encouraging more cross-over between groups working in the UK and those working overseas or cross-culturally
- Helping the UK church welcome mission partners from outside the UK and acknowledging the vital contribution they bring and providing a platform for mission partners to the UK to play an active role in the network

So we still have a long way to go, but we have come a long way too. The church in the UK is at a crossroads. There is much discouragement but many reasons for hope. Most signs are that the church in the UK as a whole will continue to decline, but there are many signs of hopes with the evangelical church. Though some still feel that the evangelical church will not be immune to this decline, others believe the decline has bottomed out and the church is starting to grow.

Whatever your interpretation of the situation in the UK, we now have a fantastic opportunity to see the church in this country place mission at its heart. My prayer is that Global Connections will not become an irrelevance because we have failed to understand we are in a changing world and adapt appropriately, but we can take advantage of the opportunity we have.

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APPENDIX

1. SUMMARY OF EXTERNAL AND SOCIETAL INFLUENCES AFFECTING THE UK

- The lack of certainty about anything in the UK – while at the same time greater certainty about the new “religions” of the free market, democracy and personal rights
- The more post-modern society in the UK bringing with it different ways of working. Yet now we have the beginnings of post-post-modernism, or whatever name we’ll eventually come up with, as modernism seems to be in the ascendancy again.
- Individualism and “I’ll do it my way” being peddled in an extreme form
- The expectation of continued affluence and personal wealth building as a sacred right – and now almost part of evangelical theology here
- The ageing population and the crisis in pension provision
- The beginning of the end for the welfare state, with increasing “privatisation” of social services
- The perceived breakdown of traditional family structures and local community
- The growth of alternative relationships and communities, such as virtual communities via the internet or communities/networks around an interest – community still exists in the UK, but not on the old locality basis
- The UK being a mission field in itself with Christianity and religion being perceived and pushed by government and media as less central to life (and in many areas this is in reality too)
- The large non-ethnically British populations now living in the UK and Britain’s new multi-ethnic, multi-racial and multi-religious context in the cities and large towns (though much less so in small market towns and rural areas)
- The mission field of the ethnic minority incomers, both permanently settled and temporary settled such as overseas students and casual workers from other EU countries
- The arrival of missionaries from outside the UK to work with their own people groups and now increasingly with the majority ethnic population

- The fact that our traditional culture (both good and bad) is slowly being subsumed within the new globalised consumer driven culture and the “Americanisation” of society

2. SUMMARY OF SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF THE UK CHURCH

- The weakening of the church in the UK, both theologically and numerically
- The ageing of the UK church, especially in the traditional churches
- The loss of influence by the church within society and culture on belief issues. The church’s norms are no longer wider society’s norms
- The greater opportunities that the church has, and a recognition by government of the churches’ contribution, in local social projects
- The lack of depth of discipleship and biblical lifestyle amongst evangelicals. We seem to follow the prevalent culture, and re-interpret scripture to suit our prejudices
- The lack of missional teaching in training colleges, in literature and from the pulpit
- The lack of a missional mind-set – with survival mode pre-dominating in many churches
- The division of the evangelical church on theological, social and ethnic grounds – people are now much more flexible denominationally than ever before, but seek churches where they are comfortable - theologically, socially and ethnically
- The argument about who controls mission and the subsequent rise of local churches being involved in direct sending and not going through agencies, or at least demanding a more inclusive approach by agencies to which their people are linked
- Set against this, the enormous rise in the number of small new mission “agencies” as people go it alone
- The argument about what mission really is – the evangelism verses social transformation debate is still alive here in some parts of the church
- Mission no longer being “over there”, but the same issues needing to be addressed by churches and agencies working in the UK, both cross-culturally or within their own ethnic group
- The rise of “short-term mission” – and even holiday mission
- Understanding how to reach out in a post-Christian and post-Christendom environment where different models are needed to the past and maybe different models to what has worked in a pre-Christian setting