

At Play in the Fields of the Lord

Structures that invite innovation

Richard Tiplady

Our goal now is to think about how we can create mission agencies that can thrive in contexts of continual change. There is no doubt that many feel that we are living in a time of transition and change

Now, what if the contemporary experience of uncertainty, diversity and complexity are not simply a transition point along the highway, but is in fact our destination, at least for the foreseeable future. What if David Bosch was correct when describing the shift from one paradigm to another?

“New paradigms do not establish themselves overnight. They take decades, sometimes centuries, to develop distinctive contours. The new paradigm is therefore still emerging and it is, as yet, not clear which shape it will eventually adopt”¹.

If this is correct, then we face some challenges. During this conference we have outlined and analysed some contemporary changes that are impacting upon mission agencies, and we have considered some proposed solutions. But what about tomorrow's or next year's as-yet-unforeseen changes? How can we deal with them? More importantly, how can we do it together?

Much of what we have done during this conference is to offer ideas and approaches that you can take back with you to your organisation. In this final session, we want to spend some time asking whether there are things that we should be doing together, rather than individually, to help mission agencies not thrive, rather just survive, in this new era of world mission.

1. Coffee shops and wine bars

OK, so these are fairly 1980s-type meeting places, but they describe what I mean. Conferences like this are helpful, because they allow us to do a number of things – to meet our friends, to discuss issues and ideas of common concern, and also meet people different to ourselves. We're forced out of our usual terms of reference, and made to look at things from a different perspective.

Structurally, we need these meeting places. We need forums and events and locations where we can meet up. Global Connections provides a lot of these through its various forums; OCMS have run a series of one-day seminars on key issues in organisational development; the Henry Martyn Centre runs an annual

¹ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p349.

“Wisdom in Mission” forum. But why should meeting places like these be so important?

We are told that we live in a knowledge economy, that it is the only form of capital worth having. Unlike other forms of capital, knowledge doesn't decrease in value by being shared. Instead, it increases in value. If I have £1000, and give you half, then my stock of capital has gone down by 50%. But if I share my knowledge with you, I have lost nothing (except perhaps the ability to charge as much money for it, since others now have that knowledge as well, or perhaps the ego buzz of knowing something you don't). I don't know any less for sharing my knowledge with you. In the meantime, your knowledge has increased (so your overall stock of capital has increased in value). And it is likely that in fact my overall stock of knowledge has gone up as well, since in the interaction by which I share my knowledge with you, you will shape and add to it, thereby increasing my own understanding at the same time.

Conversations and research in areas that are broadly similar to our own are the most likely to be of immediate relevance. Because we are interacting with people whose interests are akin to ours, assumptions and values are often fairly similar. But knowledge creation isn't just about the sharing of information. It is also about taking insights from one discipline or area and using them to resolve problems in another. I personally find it much more interesting to read “off the course” than to follow the set texts, and in doing so often discover insights that can be applied fruitfully to the issue at hand. I hope that my book, *World of Difference*, will be an example of the value of this. And so we need to meet with and learn from those who are very different to ourselves, and whose concerns and focus is different. This is always risky, since it is possible that there will be little common ground, and so we will pass by one another (changing the metaphor slightly) like ships in the night. But it is also potentially very fruitful, as it can lead to the generation of new knowledge and insight that would not otherwise have been available.

Why is this important for the future? Because by creating a culture that values exploration and learning, we set up organisations that are able to adapt and respond to unforeseen changes as they happen? If we don't create a culture that value such experimentation now, we are going to be less able to respond to unforeseen change when it hits us.

The key question is – are all the meeting places that we need available? Do we need new ones? If so, what types? What sort of coffee, or wine, or knowledge, should they serve?

2. Work that skunk!

Lockheed's famous 'Skunkworks' (which developed the SR-71 'Blackbird' and U2 spy planes, and the F-117 'stealth' fighter), Xerox's PARC, and GM's Saturn car plant (which was built in Tennessee, well away from the standard ways of thinking about car production in Detroit) are all examples of the value of having separate groups within an organisation that are focussed on innovation.

These separate groups are sometimes called "skunkworks". A skunkworks is a group of people who, in order to achieve unusual results, work on a project in a way that is outside the usual rules. A skunkworks is often a small team that assumes or is given responsibility for developing something in a short time with minimal management constraints. In short, people are given room to play with new ideas, to experiment with them, and to see what they come up with.

Doing so not only provides space for new ways of thinking; it also keeps new explorations safe from the 'organisational antibodies' that flock to protect an organisation from invasions of new stuff. New research usually relies on obscurity and isolation to resist attack.

But the separation that advances innovation can also create problems for it. The distance that supports innovation also restricts its translation back into the body politic. Thinking outside the box can sometimes mean leaving the box behind, which doesn't help the box. So any ideas developed by skunkworks need to have ways of bringing their ideas to the mainstream.

So, the question is, what 'skunkworks' exist within the UK missionary movement? Where are the innovative practices that are being developing outside of formal coordination? Who is identifying them, and how can we make them known, accepted and available?

3. Hold all things in common

There are two types of innovation. The first is *incremental* – the process of making regular improvements to existing products or services. This is a cosy, familiar type of innovation, which is easily accommodated by the established order.

The second type of innovation is of the *disruptive* variety – developments that upset, transform or replace established models, expectations and frameworks, creating hitherto unimagined possibilities. These changes upsets powerful applecarts.

The challenge is, it is the second type of innovation that really matters. The adoption of the voluntary society by the nascent Protestant missionary movement was an example of this, usurping as it did powerful ecclesiastical controls. The

Internet is another more-recent example, allowing, among other things, the world wide web, instant messaging, peer-to-peer file-sharing, and online auctions, without the permission of BT, AT&T, or any of the other telephone monopolies.

The reason that both these innovations had the effect they did was that they are examples of 'innovation commons', i.e. uncontrolled spaces available to all. This concept is based on the pre-enclosure 'commons' that each village had in England. It was a space open to all, where they could graze their sheep.

Like 'skunkworks', 'innovation commons' give people space to play. They take something that is commonly owned, and use it to develop new ideas and practices. No-one gave BMS permission to come into being. Permission wasn't needed. The voluntary society provided the 'commons' for new missionary involvement by anyone who wanted to give it a try. The 'faith mission' movement of the late C19 did the same thing. Because of globalisation and its disintermediating processes, world mission is again becoming an 'innovation commons', with local churches and new organisations getting involved in new and creative ways. Established mission agencies need to find a way of making use of this and other emerging 'commons' to develop new ways of working, as yet unforeseen, which will disrupt their own existing power structures. They need to do this, because if they don't, others will do it for them.

So what 'commons' exist for us? What platforms for common action exist? To function as 'innovation commons' they will need to be incredibly secure, willing to allow others to use their facilities for the sake of innovation? Do we have these available to us?

Summary

It would be possible for these ideas to be taken back and used within individual organisations. The question I want to ask is, "how can we develop them cooperatively, for the benefit of the whole sector?". We need spaces to play and experiment with new ideas and approaches, and we need mechanisms that can translate these innovations into a wider sphere.