

# Collecting data or listening to stories?

## Introduction

How do we go about engaging people when we need the “long story” rather than a very structured and directed enquiry process? That is the question I was faced with as I sought to begin to address one of the “big questions” in mission.

## The Background to the “Your Story” Project

*“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them everything I have commanded you.”*

Jesus’ Great Commission has been undertaken by men and women for the last 2000 years since he said that. Particularly in the last 400 years, tens of thousands have crossed seas to reach different lands and cultures with the Good News that is Jesus. The Christian faith has gone from near extinction<sup>1</sup> to a truly global faith movement – the worldwide church of Jesus Christ. However in recent years the numbers leaving mission early has increased to such an extent that agencies across the world see this as a major issue facing their success, even their very survival.

*“Many of my peers have returned from missionary services crushed and broken by the very organisations that promised to support them. And many more have never fulfilled their calling to mission because they could not see themselves ever fitting into the established missions organisations.”*

A church planter on the field for over 7 years

Statistics tell so little of the story. Each person is a product of thousands of pounds of investment in language and biblical training, orientation, preparation, travel etc.<sup>2</sup> to say nothing of what business calls the ‘opportunity cost’ - the hard to quantify, “what could have been” value. And then for each person that leaves mission there are all the supporters, friends and family members: what of their image, impression and likelihood of continued involvement in mission. The World Evangelical Alliance: Missions Commission (WEA MC) - ReMAP study in 1995 showed that substantial numbers were leaving mission across 14 different countries, half of which were “new sending countries<sup>3</sup>”. This problem is not just a Western one!

It would certainly not be fair to say that mission agencies have just ignored the problem. A number have carried out their own studies but these and the WEA MC study covering 450 agencies were I believe limited from two key perspectives:

1. Research was Agency, not Individual focused.
2. Research began with a member-care focus and was often undertaken solely by member care practitioners.

It was agency focused because the research was done by asking agencies why individuals left and unfortunately the official systems in mission agencies usually only know ‘official’ reasons why, if any, that people have left.

Member-care focused and led work begins with the individual people in mind, which at first glance would seem a perfect starting place. However, it gives a natural bias to focusing on the individual. Whilst this focus looks at the issues individuals face, it seems also to have focused on the individual when looking at solving the issues. ‘If we can select out those that won’t stay

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<sup>1</sup> Neill, Stephen, A History of Christian Missions

<sup>2</sup> A denominational mission recently calculated that it had cost over £200,000 to prepare a couple for service. They calculated the cost when the couple left after one year of service!

<sup>3</sup> For details on ReMAP II, published papers and country contacts see [www.generatingchange.co.uk](http://www.generatingchange.co.uk) or the Paper by Valerie Lim at 11am on Tuesday 12<sup>th</sup>.

and just care enough for the rest, then we solve the problem': kind of 'if we hug them hard enough, they won't break' mindset.

The problem with an exclusively member-care focused approach is that your costs for providing that care soon exceed what can be afforded.

It seemed that the time was overdue to stop seeing the individuals as the only people with a problem and look deeply and fundamentally at our organisations, the mission agencies themselves. To date we have sometimes viewed the agency as a sacred cow that is untouchable, the framework of round holes into which we must force our square recruits assuring them that the pain of having their corners knocked off is the sacrificial cost of missionary work. And the corners must be sins or character flaws that God is seeking to rid us of. What we don't realise, dare not face or even contemplate is that round pegs that created organisations with round holes were a cultural shape, just as flawed and sinful as the square pegs of today's culture<sup>4</sup> and actually some of the corners we try to knock off are very characteristics God is seeking to build into his missionary workforce today.

### **The birth of 'Your Story'**

It was this conviction, from watching many the silhouettes of numerous mission partners disappearing earlier than planned from the work in Nepal where they were seconded from over forty different missions, which led me in 2001, with strong encouragement from Bill Taylor of the WEA Missions Commission, to begin research on individuals' experiences in mission. In *Too Valuable to Lose*<sup>5</sup> Bill states in his concluding chapter

*"...we need a serious study that listens to the up-to-now unheard voices that speak to attrition issues. Among these are the voices of former missionaries, particularly those who left under difficult circumstances. Such a study would require a carefully crafted research instrument, confidentiality, and a "neutral" body to receive and analyze the survey returns and write up the report."*

So in the summer of 2001 we began work researching how to do a survey of individuals. What started out as an idea for a small task became much bigger when we looked at the numbers involved: we wanted to include mission partners sent from the UK who were currently on the field and also who had been on the field but who had left in the last ten years. This was approximately 5,000 on the field and 10,000 who had left in the last ten years. It was at this point that I was asked if I would be the UK coordinator for a follow-up study to ReMAP, this time looking at retention instead of attrition and correlating it with a whole cross-section of agency practices.

ReMAP II turned out to be one of the most significant studies ever undertaken in global mission and took up much of my research time for the next year. When I returned to the instrument design for the study of individuals I attempted to align the questions I was asking individuals with those asked of the mission leaders. Part of the motivation for this was seeking to build on the ReMAP results and complete the existing data set with corroborating data from another source. Another reason came from other research I was doing on organisational behaviour assessing the health or toxicity of both organisations and their leaders. A key measure of a leaders health is the resonance or dissonance between what they believe to be the reality within their organisation and what their employees see. By having comparable data from leaders and mission partners alike I could assess this.

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<sup>4</sup> see Tiplady, R, (2003) *World Of Difference: Global Mission at the Pic'N'Mix Counter*. Paternoster, for a strong case of current mission agency structures being a result of cultural structural models (voluntary societies and trading companies) in use at the time of the emergence of the denominational an faith missions we still see today.

<sup>5</sup> Taylor, William D, (1997) *Too Valuable to Lose: Exploring the Causes and Cures of Missionary Attrition*. William Carey Library

**Problems of engagement**

Duplicating the questions of ReMAP was straightforward, altering some of the sentences so that they were worded for an individual rather than an organisation e.g.

ReMAP II Question	Question for Individuals
5. Estimate what percentage of your missionaries' allowances are allocated for retirement.	What percentage of your allowance was allocated for retirement?
<p>Please provide an estimated breakdown of your missionary task force, indicating the approximate percentage of your missionaries primarily involved in the following areas:</p> <p>6. Evangelism &amp; Church planting among "Unreached Peoples" (less than 1% Evangelicals)</p> <p>7. Evangelism &amp; Church planting among peoples with more than 1% Evangelicals</p> <p>8. Support of existing churches (Bible teaching, pastoral, etc.)</p> <p>9. Social and community work (agriculture, medical, relief &amp; development, etc.)</p> <p>10. Service (translation, missionary childrens' education, aviation, administration, etc.)</p>	<p>How would you describe your primary work?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Evangelism &amp; Church planting among "Unreached Peoples" (less than 1% Evangelicals)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Evangelism &amp; Church planting among peoples with more than 1% Evangelicals</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Support of existing churches (Bible teaching, pastoral, etc.)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Social and community work (agriculture, medical, relief &amp; development, etc.)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Service (translation, missionary childrens' education, aviation, administration, etc.)</p>
<p>Please indicate the extent to which your mission considers the following factors before accepting an applicant for cross-cultural service. Circle the most appropriate response from 0 to 6 where:</p> <p>0 = not assessed, 1 = assessed but not given a great deal of weight in the final decision, up to 6 = assessed and given a great deal of weight in the final decision.</p> <p>11. Expresses a clear calling to missionary service</p> <p>0 1 2 3 4 5 6</p>	<p>How important was "calling" to your missionary service? Circle the most appropriate response from 0 to 6 where:</p> <p>0 = not important at all, 1 = slightly important, up to 6 = vitally important.</p> <p>0 1 2 3 4 5 6</p>

Unfortunately during testing it became evident that this approach just did not work: people did not want to engage sufficiently with the instrument. In fact it was such a disaster that I questioned whether anyone was interested in the subject enough to make it a workable study.

However this did not match with my experience one-to-one with leavers in Nepal or back in the UK. I interviewed those I has sought to engage with the form and had no problem in eliciting information...they were all keen to tell me their story. It seemed that the problem was with my approach.

The ReMAP II instrument layout was functional, based around processes and was almost exclusively looking for a quantitative rating in each area. Particularly for those who had left recently or who had left in difficult circumstances this appeared cold and clinical and far removed from their felt reality.

In reflecting on what was working and what was not I realised that almost everyone I had interviewed had talked of telling their story and indeed had related their experiences in a story like fashion: they had told me their experience, usually in chronological order (but sometimes jumping back and forth to clarify something), often they struggled for words and sought around for words – synonyms: feeling they were not quite getting the exact word or that the exact word did not exist and so they used one to symbolise what they felt. Like a story it was also common that they wanted to clarify something, to caveat a statement or an answer.

These findings forced me back to the very concept of what I was seeking to do. It was vital that the study be statistically robust enough that it would convince mission agency leaders and others that these were real issues based on well researched fact, but it was also vital that the study engaged meaningfully with a large enough sample of the population. Therefore I took a conscious decision to attempt to find a balance: to allow innovative new techniques that whilst harder to analyse and score would engage people and allow it to be as close to a story-telling experience as possible.

The result is “Your Story”. It is specifically designed to be as close to a natural story telling process as possible with the following characteristics:

It is designed around a chronological order to suit the story rather than a functional order to suit the analysis

The initial questions are the kind that would be covered if you began your face-to-face meeting with “Tell me a bit about yourself” including such things as name, family situation, family background and current and recent jobs.

It asks about the driving force – “call” and allows people to put this into their own words.

### **Techniques**

Statistically I have used regular survey instrument techniques; yes/no answers scales etc. but I have also incorporated two newer techniques to try to facilitate the “story” feel:

**Word Association:** It uses word association. This uses a balance of words tested in focus groups and draft instrument trials and allows people to use emotive “feeling” and perception responses – something particularly useful for people who are also using the process as a debrief.

**Free Text:** It allows respondents to clarify or indeed in some instances, to answer in free text. This free text is then analysed using Content Analysis to provide a quantitative result.

### **Approach**

I have introduced the story concept in the invitation and have attempted to make it seem like a conversation, relating the respondents’ experiences. The covering letter/email includes:

*We want to hear the story of your mission experience, both the bad and the good. We are asking everyone who is sent from the UK and currently serving in overseas mission and also everyone who has left in the last ten years. Your story is entirely confidential and will not be shared with anybody in an identifiable form...*

*We want to hear your story so that we can combine it with the stories of thousands of other mission partners sent from the UK and help mission agencies, churches and others understand the issues people face, the issues they struggle with, the good, the bad and the painful.*

### **Medium**

The survey instrument is available in three forms: web-based (viewable online at [www.generatingchange.co.uk/yourstory/form.php](http://www.generatingchange.co.uk/yourstory/form.php) - enter 'guest' as username and password), html-based email and paper-based. The web and email versions upload directly to a SQL database and the web version includes validation of all demographic fields entered. The web version has also been written in a standalone format to allow individual mission agencies to upload it onto their own secure servers where appropriate.

### **Expandable**

The survey instrument is able to be rolled out to additional countries without any structural changes required. If translation is required it can be done on the front end of the web and email versions with the database remaining unchanged.

### **Promotion of Participation**

Participation in the study is being done in a number of ways: through individual mission agencies to their current members and through pension records to their past members, to individuals through media coverage, churches and "tell a friend". Networks such as global connections, WEA and others are linking through to the survey. This raises the question of how we maintain the validity and significance of the results being as we are effectively comparing two main groups: those that have left mission earlier than planned ("attritee") and those that have not/did not leave ("survivor"). To maintain this validity we require 2 "survivors" for every "attritee". Being as the vast majority (over 95%) of respondents are by web or email, with direct real-time upload to the website we are monitoring the ratio and can at any time limit participation to the under represented group.

### **Conclusion**

These are some of the lessons I have learned as I moved from a survey on organisational subjects to one on human subjects. During the session at the conference I will share from the live survey instruments and the database and am happy to provide an email version to anyone (this can be requested by emailing me on the address below). I would welcome other people's experiences in these areas, particularly any other approaches to story style instruments, use of word association and use of free text and its analysis, as well as triangulation of similar studies.

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