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Business as Missions

How Do Church and Agency Connect?

Catalyst conducted separate interviews with three highly regarded business as missions (BAM) practitioners and compiled their answers in this article. We were particularly interested in the intersection of BAM with the local church and agency.

Ellen Livingood: There is certainly a growing buzz about BAM. Does the potential live up to the hype?

Mike Baer: That's a good question. The short answer is "no." There are a lot of conferences and people are excited, but not many are actually doing it. More people are involved in tentmaking than what I would call true BAM enterprise.

I think two things have limited BAM's growth. First, the US marketplace ministry movement (living for Christ in my workplace) has hijacked BAM. It's more comfortable to do ministry in my current setting than to consider short-term, long-term, or life-term cross-cultural engagement.

Second, church leaders aren't stepping up and embracing BAM as a truly exciting, beneficial, strategic methodology. Rather than fighting the church missions committee, business people are doing it on their own. Many are tired of having to constantly explain what they are doing and why it matters—so they disconnect from the church in this part of their life and get involved off the church's radar screen.

Peter Shaukat: Business as mission is still relatively young—most of us would say it is 12-15 years old as a discernable movement. That means it is fresh and gathering a lot of momentum. It also means there is going to be a lot of immaturity. BAM suffers from a significant amount of confusion around what its goals are, what it is about, how to measure impact, etc. As it ages, I hope we see a stabilizing rather than a paralysis.

There is a lot more writing and talking and conferencing about BAM than actual execution on the ground. On the other hand, there is substantial work being done that no one knows about. That is the nature of how God works.

Noe Palacios: Everyone has jumped on the bandwagon and defined BAM as whatever pieces fit them. For one person, BAM is micro-enterprise. For another, it is matching Christian businesspeople in the West with peers in the Majority World. For others, it is establishing businesses that support ministry or provide visas. This lack of clarification has complicated the implementation of BAM.

In North America, there are a lot of Christians who own businesses, but they aren't Kingdom businesses. These are good people who run their companies efficiently and ethically, but we need to engage them effectively for the Kingdom. This will take training and mentoring.

EL: Should churches have a game plan for BAM?

PS: I would restate the question. I think there is a critical need in a larger theological/ missiological sense to rethink what we mean by church. There is a growing understanding that the church is much bigger than the local congregation, and that the church is a much more multi-faceted reality. Mission agencies and the business community should not be conceived as separate entities but as a part of the church. What we are seeing emerge are affinity groups—like the business community—that don't capture the full orbed expression of the church, but neither does the local congregation at the corner of State and Main.

♦BAM♦

"...the church has to have a game plan for BAM; otherwise, it is missing out on a huge part of what it is called to be."

Peter Shaukat

♦BAM♦

So should there be a "game plan" you ask. Yes, built on this deeper reflection of the whole church. The call to extend the Kingdom of God—both in reach and depth—is incumbent upon every church and constitutes its core identity. The business world represents one of seven mind molders (along with arts, government, etc.). To the extent that the business world is a critical part of human society, the church has to have a game plan for BAM; otherwise, it is missing out on a huge part of what it is called to be. These game plans will be different because churches' capacity and callings vary.

Without a plan, the church will leave tremendously gifted business people sitting on the sidelines. On the other hand, my blood curdles when I hear people say, "BAM is *the* strategy for the 21st century." That is overreached. BAM is "a" strategy, a key strategy, but it is only one of many.

I would ask both the church and the prospective BAM worker about their viewpoint. Do they see business as a sacred calling or a utilitarian servant of another set of values that are more important?

♦BAM♦

An effective BAM team requires multi-gifted/ talented individuals, not just an entrepreneur.

Noe Palacios

♦BAM♦

NP: The church needs to recognize BAM as a legitimate and God honoring way of blessing the nations. For those involved in restricted countries, BAM is the only legitimate way of doing Kingdom work, but it needs to be grounded on a biblical worldview that permeates every aspect of the business operations. We businesspeople have a broad range of contacts with the community on a day-to-day basis and are modeling our beliefs through everything we say and do. Hopefully, those who come into contact with us see Him.

The church working with BAMers needs to develop integrated, ministry-strategic plans that incorporate spiritual and business activities. It is not one or the other, but both. This is often an uncomfortable situation for church leaders because it is foreign to them. For example, plans need to answer: Who is going to be the BAMers' advisory committee to provide accountability? Where are they going to get seed money? Have they done due diligence to determine how the business will function? How will they get the needed language training? The church must make sure the BAMer has the tools and understanding to start and keep it going.

EL: Mike, you have been both a pastor as well as a businessman. What do you think?

MB: First, church leaders need to embrace BAM rather than resist it or try to control it. It is going to happen, so jump in now. Jump in deep. Don't wait.

Secondly, church leaders have to make sure that their BAM involvement is connected to meaningful mission locations. There is something powerful when you get connected to what God is doing in the world.

Third, they need to go to a place like the Ukraine or Mongolia, and figure it out together with those who have specialized experience and expertise. Make the effort to go see and learn what it looks like and how it is working.

Some churches are doing aspects of this, but if they could also develop a BAM ministry program/track with a systematic way to set up and sustain these businesspeople, it would be very powerful. A BAM track is vital if we are going to keep the business thinkers and doers in partnership with the church. If they don't find a place to plug into, they will find another or make one of their own somewhere else. Most would gladly integrate with the church; they would appreciate church blessing and support.

EL: What are the elements a church should incorporate into their "BAM track"? Noe, you came into BAM through a church. How should it work?

NP: First, assess if there is a real need for a BAM alternative to traditional missions. Second, look for people who are gifted as entrepreneurs, but recognize that an effective BAM team requires multi-gifted/talented individuals, not just an entrepreneur. The entrepreneur traditionally is the visionary and the risk taker, but it takes a team to sustain and reproduce it. The teams I am working with have four core members who bring expertise in specific areas: (1) business development, (2) operations, (3) finance and administration, and (4) spiritual development. These four individuals balance each other and hold one other accountable for the work. It is also wise to have a champion or advocate in the church who understands BAM, protects the BAMers, and fights for them.

Third, take the time to educate the missions pastor and other staff about BAM. Provide opportunities for spiritually mature businesspeople to come alongside the church staff and form an alliance.

For example, Mary goes to Central Asia to begin a physical fitness business. Her goal is to develop relationships with people in a niche group who will buy this service. The advocate or group of businesspeople can hold her accountable to be doing the right things and can champion her to the church. They help the church understand how a gym serves Kingdom purposes.

♦BAM♦

BAMers need some level of missiological education, not formal, but some foundational training.

Mike Baer

♦BAM♦

MB: When the church is doing effective equipping of the saints for ministry, a lot of what is needed has already been communicated. A lot of it is life-on-life discipleship.

But that doesn't cover the overseas aspects. BAMers need some level of missiological education, not formal, but some foundational training—for instance in the issue of accountability. One of the dangers of "cowboys" running off on their own is they have no accountability to anyone. They can crash and burn, and no one will know it. The moral failure rate for missionaries is high enough, but going into a business context without a spiritual level of accountability is a disaster. Most entrepreneurial guys hate accountability with a passion. They like to

hold other people accountable but don't like it for themselves.

There are character issues too. Some people who can live quite well in Western church settings will collapse on arrival on the field. They will be accosted by demonic attack and need to understand spiritual warfare. Their prayer life needs to be strong.

We businesspeople can lose sight of our mission because of pride. One of the great things the church can do is keep businesspeople connected to the main thing. Insisting we keep a spiritual focus puts everything in perspective and exposes pride and stubbornness.

BAMers also need a good support network, both spiritual and logistical. I have seen more than one person start an overseas business without logistical support. They have no one to turn to, say for instance, in how to handle legal issues. The church may already have networks that can help them. The church needs to identify how to actively assist.

PS: Churches need to start by prayerfully searching the Scriptures and opening their eyes to the world. Then they need to bring in people who can help them think through issues and move to a sense of what God wants them to do next. Within their congregation are people called to business. These individuals and related capital can be mobilized collaboratively.

I don't think churches should invest financially in BAM initiatives. The church should see its calling to teach, educate, mobilize, pray, and engage with partners (as many partners as needed to execute the plan effectively). They should not get directly involved in the business of business or investing in business enterprise.

♦BAM♦

One thing that has hurt us is that we have said we are going to do business and then we focus on "ministry." BAM is ministry.

Noe Palacios

♦BAM♦

Effective BAM efforts are built on good consultation and solid theology. Church leaders need to enthusiastically own it. The strength of local congregations is that they come with a wide range of activity experience. That needs to be matched by missions partners (or I prefer the term "mission task forces") and business partners with focused competencies. Even where the local church has the capacity of numbers and dollars to make it happen on their own, there is high risk. The mission task force brings longevity and sustainability. They also can build core competencies and bring needed expertise.

EL: So churches should encourage BAM people to connect to an agency?

PS: The local church needs to see itself as a participant in the larger engagement of the Body of Christ. While agencies have often failed in the way they treat the local congregation as a partner in missions, it needs to be a carefully orchestrated dance together.

♦BAM♦

Churches should encourage people going into BAM to have a network and association with strategic missions partners.

Peter Shaukat

♦BAM♦

Churches should encourage people going into BAM to have a network and association with strategic missions partners. An agency that does BAM well is the obvious match for a businessperson, but unfortunately while many agencies claim to do BAM, they aren't equipped or structured for it.

There is also just the "ethos fit" aspect. BAMers need to look for an organization with whom they can work effectively. Both the church and the businessperson need to be comfortable in the relationship with the agency.

EL: How can agencies function effectively in a three-way partnership with BAMers and churches?

MB: The agencies I know are struggling because they want to engage BAM and increasingly see the need for it, but a breakdown occurs around the business aspects.

For example, say I am a businessman who wants to go to Asia and open a small hotel, but I also want to be part of a network. I approach a mission agency for prayer support, mission training etc. The agency may accept me, but I will have the red "B" on my forehead and I will be viewed as an oddball. I have watched the disconnects all of the way from appointment to the field.

Case in point: I know of a 55-year-old successful business leader who took early retirement to commit his time to BAM. The agency placed him under a young, traditional missionary who had a Bible school background. It was a categorical misfit. If BAMers are to join an agency, they need to be full-fledged members; they also need to have the freedom to go out and do what they do best.

NP: Agencies also have got to come to grips with BAM being for profit. That goes against the grain of how they have operated and is hard for them to embrace. Kingdom businesses need to bring glory to God by exemplifying a model that is ethical, and one aspect of ethical business practice is the commitment to be profitable. One thing that has hurt us

is that we have said we are going to do business and then we focus on "ministry." BAM ***is*** ministry.

Agencies can partner with churches to encourage spiritually mature businesspeople to mentor and coach BAM teams. There is tremendous value in this. All parties benefit and there is a greater sense of accountability.

EL: Peter, you have served in a mission organization as well as a BAM business. How do you advise agencies?

PS: I begin by asking agencies why they want to do BAM. Agencies need to start with a robust theology of work and ministry. They need an understanding of the gospel that is truly holistic. Unless that is clear, the rest will never follow, and there will be perpetual tension and confusion. Some agencies launch BAM because they want to help fund their other enterprises. Some are afraid of losing their relevance. Others just need visas.

♦BAM♦

Agencies need to evaluate the core competencies they can add to the exercise of BAM.

Peter Shaukat

♦BAM♦

Then there is a whole set of structural issues. The traditional mission operating platform is not going to mesh with BAM—for example training requirements and home assignments. Add to that the issues of ownership, risk, liability, reward, and collaboration. An agency that tries to control or own the business is going to have problems. How does it view profit? Competition? What is the agency stance toward a government whose interventionist activities could cut the taproot of business activity?

Agencies need to evaluate the core competencies they can add to the exercise of BAM. Usually these focus around cross-cultural issues, theological issues, and how BAMers relate to the religious community in which they work. These are areas where agencies have done well.

♦BAM♦

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Mike Baer

♦BAM♦

EL: So is the triangle of business/church/agency really viable? Is it worth the effort?

MB: I get excited about the potential of integrating business and traditional missions. It forces both sides to get away from a disintegrated view of life and look at what the Lordship of Christ looks like in every dimension.

Our perspectives become jaded because our education and experience are "ministry" or "corporate." We have to create forums for people from both disciplines to talk it out. This needs to start on the local level with open debate between pastors and businesspeople. We need to stop disrespecting each other and figure it out together. It can be very powerful!

In my experience, what is most effective is entering a country to work by direct invitation of a missionary. We build a partnership under him or her, and beyond that person, only with those who have some level of business understanding. We need a common place to dialog. Whenever we have met these criteria, the business enterprise has launched more quickly and been more sustainable. Where we have gone in without these relationships, our efforts have dried up and blown away over time. So we've learned, and we turn down a lot of invitations because there isn't a local missionary involved or the interested parties just view us as a way to get visas.

PS: The expectations are many times profoundly flawed on the part of all partners—businessperson, church, and agency. For instance, when I am interviewing people for potential management roles in BAM enterprises, I ask how many hours per week they anticipate putting into running the business. If they do not plan to invest long hours, they don't understand what business takes.

From the agency side, I want to know what the mission team on the ground expects of the BAMer. Do they have a whole set of activities they expect him/her to participate in? Most traditional missions operations are somewhat more predictable on the ground. You can plan for conferences and team meetings. Business is often more interrupted with crises that can be difficult to mesh with traditional missions activities. These expectations need to be addressed. There isn't necessarily a right or wrong answer, but there needs to be a frank, transparent negotiation and flexibility.

In theory and in practice, every BAMer should be linked to the local receiving church in some way unless there are security issues that make that inappropriate. But BAMers do not usually fill the role of a church planter although they may contribute to the overall effort to see the church established. This balance needs to be carefully negotiated.

NP: We are wrestling with these connections right now. Part of the challenge is that churches vary widely. Some get BAM; some don't. Individuals with extensive experience in BAM need to be educating churches about how it plays out. People in the 20-35 age range are gravitating to BAM. They need preparation.

On the agency side, the majority of missionaries don't have a clue about what it takes to run a business. It is important to identify those who understand the work it will demand and still want to pursue marketplace ministry. We can come alongside those people and help them learn the nuances of business.

Training nationals is another aspect of BAM. It is all together different than preparing expat missionaries to do business. We need to help missionary BAMers to develop national colleagues.

♦BAM♦

...businesspeople...would love the opportunity to sit down with a pastor and dialog about these issues.

Mike Baer

♦BAM♦

EL: Are agencies helping traditional missionaries and BAMers work together?

PS: Many are taking it seriously and trying to bring the two groups together. However, often there is a gulf, sometimes exacerbated by the actions of either group. Both types of cross-cultural workers need to consciously narrow the gap. Many organizations are trying to figure out how to make it work, and there is a growing amount of good will.

MB: Businesspeople respond well to process; they appreciate the map at the mall that says, "You are here." So agencies need an integrated plan for recruiting, developing, and preparing businesspeople. Get these potential BAMers out into the real world and then bring them back and debrief. If the agency and church don't show directional progress, business people will bail out. Both church and agency need to pick up the pace with business types.

Another concern of mine is that most businesspeople are ignorant of theological and especially missiological issues. They are entrepreneurial, take-no-prisoners types of people, and they can do horrible missiological damage. They must partner and learn from missions practitioners.

On the other hand, I have seen some hard-charging, committed-disciple-type business guys who go to do BAM and leave all of their courage and toughness at home. They become crybabies, or they start giving away money like Santa Claus. They need guidance to avoid both extremes.

EL: What other advice would you have for churches and agencies as they engage in BAM or contemplate doing so?

NP: Everyone is jumping on the bandwagon, but we need to step back and rethink some aspects. What is God's mandate on this? BAM is powerful when we look at life holistically, but we need to put together the fragmented pieces so that people have a track to run on and know what resources they need for success.

PS: Business is setting the majority of the conversation around the globe today. BAM is an exciting movement, but it must be based on solid concepts and right motivation. We need real commercial enterprise that is intentionally missional and transformational.

MB: I know businesspeople all over the world who would love the opportunity to sit down with a pastor and dialog about these issues, even mentor church leaders and strategize with them. There are also mature, godly businessmen and women in most churches who would be delighted to sit down with their pastor to figure it out together. If pastors initiated this kind of dialog, they will discover a pool of wisdom that they likely didn't know was there.

♦BAM♦

Mike Baer *is a church leader turned business leader. His focus is on helping business people find an integrated view of their lives and faith, and then engage meaningfully in Kingdom work around the world.*

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