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The visibility of mission agencies in general and USPG in particular among recently ordained Anglican clergy: an empirical enquiry

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The visibility of mission agencies in general, and USPG in particular, among recently ordained Anglican clergy: an empirical enquiry

#### Abstract

Attitudes toward mission agencies in general, and toward the United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (USPG) in particular, were assessed using two 10-item scales completed by 833 recently ordained Anglican clergy from the UK. Clergy were generally positive toward mission agencies, willing for their churches to engage with them, but more reluctant to form personal links. Most clergy felt agencies should give priority to the relief of poverty and to development needs, rather than on spreading specifically Christian beliefs. Results for the USPG indicated more uncertain responses than for mission agencies generally, which probably indicated a lower visibility for this agency among some clergy, especially evangelicals.

Keywords: Anglican, attitudes, clergy, empirical theology, mission, mission agencies, survey, United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, USPG

## Introduction

During the nineteenth century, mission agencies played an important role in shaping the identity of the Church of England, both at home and overseas (Ward, 2006). At home the Church of England was rediscovering its Catholic roots through the Tractarian Movement (Hylson-Smith, 1993), and its Reformed roots through the Evangelical Movement (Hylson-Smith, 1989). Overseas these distinctive strands of the Anglican tradition were propagated through the Church Missionary Society (CMS) (Ward and Stanley, 2000), and through the initiatives that later became the United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (USPG) (O'Connor, 2000). The CMS was formed in 1799, arising out of the evangelical revivals of the eighteenth century (Ward, 2006). It stressed moral uprightness and was heavily involved in the abolition of the slave trade. The USPG traces its origins to the Revd Thomas Bray, who founded the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (SPCK) in 1698 and the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in foreign parts (SPG) in 1701 (O'Connor, 2000). Both these societies preceded the Anglo-catholic and evangelical revivals in the Church of England, but from the outset the SPG was more closely wedded to the idea of mission through the church, following the high-church tradition associated with Hooker and others (Ward, 2006). It was not surprising, then, that as time progressed the SPG and its linked societies should gravitate towards the Anglo-catholic wing of the church, while the CMS was associated with an evangelical mission that was more independent of the institutional Anglican Church.

The different approaches led to some conflict between the societies during the nineteenth century as each competed for control of mission fields (O'Connor, 2000). These differences reflected the tensions between the Anglo-catholic and evangelical wings of the Church of England itself. During the latter part of the twentieth century

the fortune of the three strands of the church tradition in the Church of England began to move in new directions. In the run up to the 1988 Lambeth Conference, Penhale (1986) spoke of 'catholics in crisis', Saward (1987) was able to speak of 'evangelicals on the move', and Walker (1988) continued to celebrate the middle way of the Broad Church tradition. Meanwhile, Bax (1986) was charting the new wine of the Charismatic movement that was already beginning to disturb the well-established landmarks of church tradition.

During this period mission agencies too were undergoing radical change, influenced both by reconceptualisation of their rationale and purpose, and by increasing financial constraints (Johnson and Clark, 2000; O'Connor, 2000; Ward and Stanley, 2000; Ward, 1999). As this tension between them waned during the twentieth century, so the emphasis within the mission societies moved from sending European missionaries to work overseas to the notion of partnership. Despite several attempts to merge the Anglican mission societies (O'Connor, 2000) they have remained separate. Societies invest much time and effort in trying to enthuse and inspire congregations in England to work in partnership with Christians from other cultures. A key point of contact remains the clergy, who are often relied upon as a link between mission agencies and lay Christians.

In this context of change, it may be important to listen to what Anglican clergy themselves are saying about the role of mission agencies in today's church. There is now in the United Kingdom a well-established research tradition concerned with listening to clergy across denominational traditions, including Roman Catholic priests (Louden and Francis, 2003), Pentecostal pastors (Kay, 2000) and Methodist ministers (Haley and Francis, 2006) as well as Anglican clergy (Francis and Robbins, 1999; Village and Francis, 2009). The views of clergy on mission agencies have, however,

remained largely invisible within this research tradition. The aim of the present study is to address this lacuna by including a section on mission agencies in a survey that is regularly distributed to all recently ordained Anglican clergy.

Given the constraints of survey space, only 20 items could be allocated to this topic. The three themes deemed crucial were (1) assessing the overall attitude of clergy toward mission agencies, (2) assessing the engagement of clergy with mission agencies; and (3) assessing the views of clergy concerning the priorities on which mission agencies should concentrate. Responses to these different aspects were assumed to give a measure of the general ‘visibility’ of agencies to clergy, that is the level to which clergy are aware of, understand and have opinions about, mission agencies today. Each theme was focused on the generic concept of ‘mission agencies’ and on one specific mission agency, namely the USPG. This agency provides a particularly interesting test case given its historic roots within the Anglo-catholic wing of the Anglican Church. The aim was to compare the visibility of mission agencies generally with that towards this specific agency, and to see if this varied between clergy of different church traditions.

## Method

### *Sample*

Questionnaires were posted to all 1656 Anglican clergy ordained as deacons between 2004 and 2006 in the United Kingdom, and 843 (51%) were returned. Of these, 833 gave answers to all the variables used in this study. In order to assess the representativeness of this sample, we compared sub-samples of our dataset with equivalent data published by national churches. In 2006, the Church of England published the age distribution for all 1296 stipendiary assistant curates serving titles in

that year, of which 63% were men and 37% were women. Curacies in the Church of England are generally last 3-4 years, so this group would be mainly people ordained since 2003. The sample in this study included 352 stipendiary curates ordained from 2004 to 2006, of which 58% were men and 42%. This sample sex ratio was not significantly different from that published by the Church of England ( $\chi^2 = 2.98$ ,  $df = 1$ , NS). The age distribution in the sample could also be compared with age distribution for all curates, and again there was no statistically significant difference ( $\chi^2 = 6.29$ ,  $df = 6$ , NS). This suggests that this portion of the study sample at least was likely to be representative of newly ordained clergy. The remaining study sample from England consisted of non-stipendiary ministers (NSMs) and Ordained Local Ministers (OLMs). Exact sex and age comparisons were not possible for these groups because the Church of England published age data for these groups as a whole, combining newly ordained and long-standing ordained clergy. However the age distributions in each case were similar, but with slightly more older clergy in the published data, as might be expected if some had served for longer. This again supports the idea that the study sample was reasonably representative of all newly ordained clergy over this period.

### *Measures*

The questionnaire included 20 Likert-type items (Likert, 1932) related to mission agencies in general and to the USPG in particular. Each item had a five-point response scale: strongly agree, agree, not certain, disagree and strongly disagree. For each group, mission agencies and USPG, there were equivalent questions asking about (a) attitudes toward, (b) engagement with, and (c) priorities for these organisations (Table 1). The middle response in these items was 'not certain', which might indicate a neutral attitude or no particular attitude toward the item in question. The nature of

most of the items meant that this response was probably an indication of lack of knowledge or engagement with mission agencies or USPG, so the proportion of ‘not certain’ responses in each of the 10 items was used as a measure of uncertainty and low visibility related to mission agencies or USPG.

The questionnaire also assessed church tradition using the bipolar scale employed in a number of other studies of Anglicans (Randall, 2005; Village and Francis, 2009, 2010). This seven-point scale is anchored at one end as ‘catholic’ and at the other as ‘evangelical’ and seems to be the most efficient way of assessing tradition among Anglicans. The scale was used to categorise respondents as Anglo-catholic or evangelical, using the two outer categories at either end of the scale. Those responding to the middle three categories were classed as ‘broad’, and represent those who are sometimes referred to as ‘middle of the road’ Anglicans. Some of these may have veered towards more Anglo-catholic or evangelical practices or beliefs, but most probably embraced features of both traditions.

## Results and Discussion

### *Mission agencies*

Table 1 presents the overall responses of the recently ordained Anglican clergy to the ten items concerned with attitudes towards, engagement with, and priorities for mission agencies. Agree and agree strongly responses are combined as ‘yes’, disagree and disagree strongly responses are combined as ‘no’ and uncertain responses are labelled as ‘?’. The data show that the vast majority of clergy had positive attitudes toward mission agencies, with eight out of ten believing that they do a good job, and a similar proportion disagreeing that they are out of date. Similar proportions of clergy agreed that they donated to mission agencies and wanted their churches to be linked to



them. Rather fewer (69%) used resources provided by mission agencies, though this was still a large majority. Less than half (46%) wanted a personal link with mission agencies, perhaps because they saw the appropriate link as being in the context of their church congregation. Taken together, these replies suggest a high level of respect for, and engagement with, mission agencies among Anglican clergy.

Notions about the priorities varied: around seven out of ten felt that mission agencies should concentrate on helping the poor (72%) or development education (67%). Half the sample believed that mission agencies should concentrate on teaching about Christ (50%), and less than two in ten believed that they should concentrate on theological education overseas (16%). Overall, the emphasis seemed to be on the relief of poverty and responding to development needs, more than on spreading specifically Christian beliefs.

### *USPG*

When these questions were repeated for USPG in particular (Table 2) the patterns were somewhat similar, but the main difference concerned the much larger proportion of uncertain responses. For example, affirmation that USPG does a good job in the world today was reduced to 55% compared with 81% for mission agencies generally. This was not reflected in a higher proportion of clergy reporting a negative attitude, but in a higher proportion of clergy choosing the 'not certain' category, probably indicating a lack of specific knowledge about this particular mission agency. This pattern was repeated for views on priorities, where the order was again in the same sequence of relieving poverty, teaching about Christ, and overseas education, but the level of positive support was reduced by the increase in uncertainty. Clergy are exposed to material from a wide range of mission agencies, and clearly some clergy

know more about USPG than do others. Moreover, the 'not certain' responses within the engagement section suggest that some clergy do not differentiate between the mission agencies with sufficient clarity to recognise the sources of the materials on which they draw. Taking definite responses, it seemed that around half of those who used the resources of mission agencies used USPG resources, and around a quarter of those who donated to mission agencies donated to USPG. Around a quarter wanted their church to be linked to USPG, but this dropped to around one in ten for the idea of a personal link with USPG.

### *Church tradition*

USPG sits alongside other mission agencies in the minds of some Anglican clergy, but other Anglican clergy are less certain about what USPG does, or should do, and whether they want to support it. Table 3 examines the extent to which the differences can be explained by church tradition, distinguishing between the views of Anglo-catholic, broad-church and evangelical clergy. For reasons of clarity, the uncertain category is omitted in Table 3, though it was used to test differences between traditions using contingency table analysis. For each item, this statistical test examines whether the distribution of responses in the agree, not certain and disagree categories varied between traditions. The data presented in Table 3 demonstrate that some of the variation in views is indeed related to church tradition, and that church tradition partly explains differences in responses to both mission agencies in general, and to USPG in particular.

For mission agencies generally, attitudes and engagement showed a fairly consistent pattern, with evangelicals having the most positive attitudes and highest engagement, and Anglo-catholics the lowest. These differences were highly

statistically significant and unlikely to be due to chance. Some differences were striking, with 70% of evangelicals looking for personal links with mission agencies compared with only 25% of Anglo-catholics. The strong association of the USPG with the Anglo-catholic wing of the Anglican Church is reflected in the opposite responses observed when this agency was highlighted in particular. Here it was Anglo-catholics who showed the most positive responses and most engagement, and evangelicals the lowest.

The items on mission priorities were less consistent, with no significant differences between traditions in items referring to mission agencies in general, apart from the evangelicals being much more in favour of teaching about Christ than were the other two traditions. When it came to USPG there were more significant differences, which were partly due to greater uncertainty among evangelicals than among other traditions, and partly due to evangelicals having different priorities for mission generally. For theological education, around one in five respondents in all traditions felt this should be a USPG priority, but Anglo-catholics were slightly less enthusiastic, while evangelicals were more undecided. Evangelicals maintained their greater preference for teaching about Christ as a priority for USPG, but this was mainly apparent in the variation in those who felt this should *not* be a priority: 23% among Anglo-catholics and only 6% among evangelicals. When it came to helping the poor and development education, all traditions were less likely to see this as a priority for USPG compared to mission agencies in general. However, nearly two-thirds of Anglo-catholics saw these as priorities, compared with well under half of evangelicals.

A key finding from the data presented in Table 3 concerns the way in which the uncertain responses vary according to church tradition. Figure 1 highlights this finding by calculating the average uncertain response across all ten items referring to

mission agencies generally and across those referring to USPG in particular. This figure makes it clear that evangelicals were the least likely group, and Anglo-catholics the most likely group, to register an 'uncertain' response when it came to the 10 items referring to mission agencies. This trend was reversed when it came to items referring specifically to USPG. Although uncertainty about USPG was a more frequent response in all traditions, this was particularly true for evangelicals. These results suggest that mission agencies generally have a higher profile among evangelicals than among Anglo-catholics, but USPG has a particularly low profile among evangelical Anglicans compared to other Anglican traditions.

## Conclusions

These differences between traditions indicate that the way in which the different traditions of the Anglican Church vary in their engagement with mission agencies. Compared to other traditions, evangelicals are generally more positive toward them, more likely to donate to them, more likely to use their resources and more likely to look for links with them. The opposite is true for Anglo-catholics, who generally prefer agencies to concentrate on relief work rather than specifically Christian evangelism. However, Anglo-catholics are more aware of USPG than are evangelicals, and have more positive or definite views about its efficacy and priorities.

This introductory study has shown that it is possible to assess attitudes toward mission agencies among Anglican clergy using relatively simple quantitative techniques. The results are based on a relatively limited number of items included in a small section of a wide-ranging survey. Limitations of space on the questionnaire prevented more detailed analysis of attitudes or beliefs about mission agencies, and such an analysis would require studies that are focused specifically on this issue.

Such a focused study could examine attitudes toward a wider range of models of mission that would embrace more of the diverse opinions found among mission partners today. Future work could also extend study to lay Anglicans and perhaps use items related to a range of named agencies to see if the patterns observed here are reflected more widely. For example, we would predict similar patterns for attitudes toward CMS among evangelicals to those toward USPG among Anglo-catholics. Mission agencies rely heavily on the support of congregations, so understanding the factors that promote their visibility among clergy and lay people is an important tool for furthering their aims and objectives.

Table 1 Attitudes, engagement and priorities for mission agencies (MAs)

	No	?	Yes
	%	%	%
<b>(a) Attitudes toward MAs</b>			
Mission agencies do a good job in the world today	2	17	81
Mission agencies are out of date in today's world	80	16	4
<b>(b) Engagement with MAs</b>			
I use resources provided by mission agencies	21	10	69
I donate money to mission agencies	13	5	82
I want to be personally linked with mission agencies	24	30	46
I want my church to be linked with mission agencies	6	13	80
<b>(c) Priorities for MAs</b>			
Mission agencies should concentrate on			
theological education overseas	55	29	16
teaching about Christ	30	20	50
helping the poor	14	14	72
development education	15	16	69

Note. Sample size = 833.

Table 2 Attitudes, engagement and priorities for USPG

	No	?	Yes
	%	%	%
<b>(a) Attitudes toward USPG</b>			
USPG does a good job in the world today	1	44	55
USPG is out of date in today's world	55	42	3
<b>(b) Engagement with USPG</b>			
I use resources provided by USPG	48	19	33
I donate money to USPG	64	14	22
I want to be personally linked with USPG	49	39	12
I want my church to be linked with USPG	32	42	26
<b>(c) Priorities for USPG</b>			
USPG should concentrate on:			
theological education overseas	27	52	21
teaching about Christ	16	40	44
helping the poor	12	35	54
development education	11	38	51

Note. Sample size = 833.

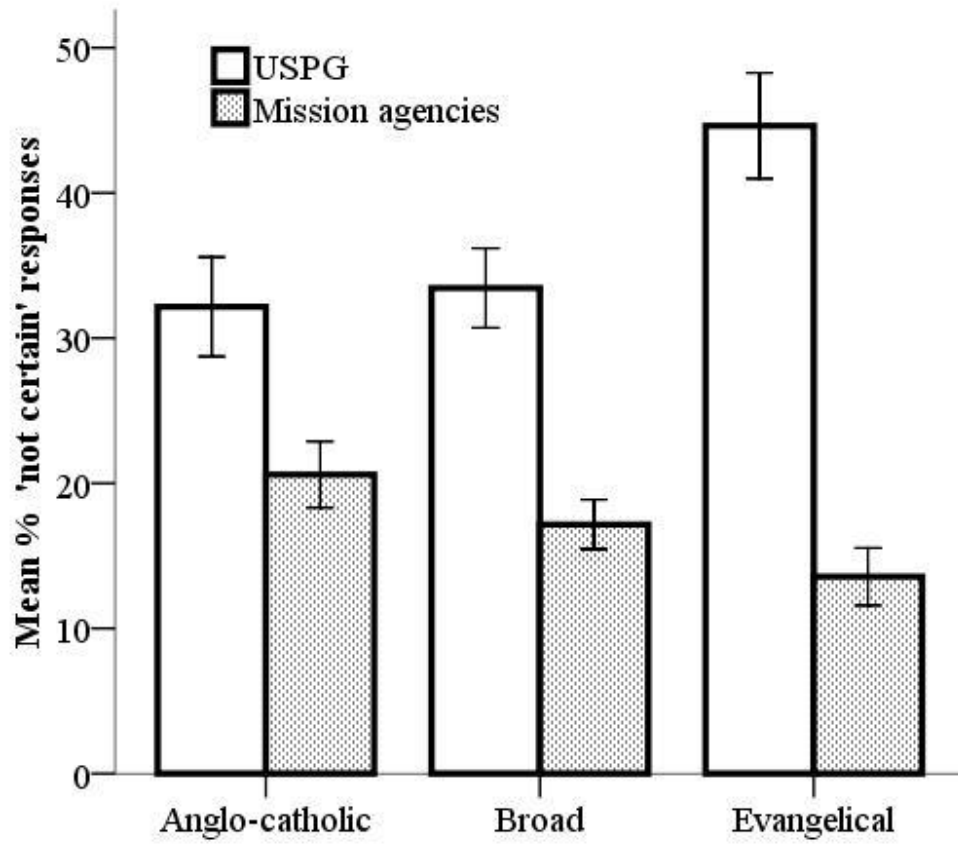
Table 3 Attitudes, engagement and priorities for mission agencies and USPG by church tradition

	Anglo-catholic		Broad		Evangelical		
	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	
	%	%	%	%	%	%	
<b>(a) Attitudes to MAs and USPG</b>							
Mission agencies do a good job	3	72	2	83	0	86	***
Mission agencies are out of date in today's world	72	7	81	3	87	2	***
USPG does a good job in the world today	0	65	1	62	2	36	***
USPG is out of date in today's world	62	2	59	3	40	3	***
<b>(b) Engagement with MAs and USPG</b>							
I use resources provided by mission agencies	33	56	17	71	17	77	***
I donate money to mission agencies	26	69	11	83	5	93	***
I want to be personally linked with mission agencies	39	25	23	44	12	70	***
I want my church to be linked with mission agencies	13	63	5	84	3	91	***
I use resources provided by USPG	39	42	43	40	64	15	***
I donate money to USPG	56	31	61	24	77	10	***
I want to be personally linked with USPG	48	13	46	15	55	7	NS
I want my church to be linked with USPG	26	34	27	31	46	10	***
<b>(c) Priorities of MAs and USPG</b>							
Mission agencies should concentrate on:							
theological education overseas	54	17	58	13	51	20	NS
teaching about Christ	34	39	36	44	18	69	***
helping the poor	13	76	14	72	16	68	NS
development education	11	73	15	71	17	63	NS
USPG should concentrate on:							
theological education overseas	28	22	33	22	16	19	***
teaching about Christ	23	39	19	44	6	49	***
helping the poor	11	65	12	56	10	41	***
development education	9	61	12	56	11	35	***

Note. Differences between traditions were tested using a Chi-squared test on the number of responses in all three categories (disagree, not certain, and agree), but for clarity the middle category is not shown in the table. \*\*\*  $p < .001$ , NS not significant.



Figure 1 Percentage of not certain replies to mission agencies and USPG items by church tradition. Error bars show the 95% confidence limits of the mean.



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