EXTINCTION REBELLION AND GLOBAL MISSION

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Category: Observations

There are many adjectives which could be used to describe the Western mission movement over the last two hundred years or so, some of them are positive and some less so. However, there is one word that I'll like to briefly consider; for the last two hundred years, the Western mission movement has been *organised*.

At this point, I can imagine some of my friends and colleagues stifling a laugh, because when you are on the inside of mission work, it doesn't always seem very organised, sometimes far from it. But let me explain. In 1792, William Carey wrote his famous "Enquiry", a summary of mission theology and practice which led to a fairly radical suggestion:

> *â€œSuppose a company of serious Christians, ministers and private persons, were to form themselves into a society, and make a number of rules respecting the regulation of the plan, and the persons who are to be employed as missionaries, the means of defraying the expense, etc., etc. This society must consist of persons whose hearts are in the work, men of serious religion and possessing a spirit of perseverance; there must be a determination not to admit any person who is not of this description, or to retain him longer than he answers to it.â€*

Carey's ideas were based on the trading companies which were sponsoring voyages of exploration and trade around the world. His ideas led to the development of the missionary societies which evolved into the mission agencies of today. In the years since Carey, most westerners who have gone out as missionaries have done so under the auspices of one of the many agencies which have emerged in the intervening years. There are many factors which have influenced the way in which agencies have evolved (download this report, if you want to know more). However, agencies tend to share one common feature; they become very organised. They may start off with a dynamic vision, inspired by a maverick apostolic figure, but they tend (there are exceptions, I know) to end up with an office, a finance department and a whole load of rules and regulations. It is actually quite difficult for agencies to avoid this sort of trajectory (I expand on this here).

For my generation, belonging to a mission agency was a positive thing. It's true that we had to fill in far too many forms and jump through lots of hoops before we could sign up, but belonging to the "Wycliffe family" was special and we saw it as a lifelong commitment.

However, outside of the mission bubble, a new type of group is developing; loose coalitions of people who are aligned with a few basic principles. Organisations such as Extinction Rebellion and Occupy. These groups are fluid with fairly loose criteria for involvement and they are much more focused on action and outcomes than they are on any structural or organisational forms. (I realise at this point, that some of my readers will be raising objections about what these groups stand for and the way they go about their actions - but that's not the focus of this post, so please leave those to one side.)

Groups like Extinction Rebellion have managed to mobilise huge numbers of highly motivated young people who are willing to sacrificially devote themselves to a cause that they see as very important. Does this remind you of anything? Societal changes, in particular, the rise of social media have made it possible for groups like these to develop and to "go viral" in a very short space of time. To be honest, I would not be surprised if Extinction Rebellion faded from the headlines in a year or so, but if it does, it will be replaced by a different activist group as people coalesce around a different cause.

Turning back to the mission world, I expect that over the next few years we will see a rise in Extinction Rebellion type groups getting involved in mission. We've already seen a rise in small entrepreneurial mission agencies and things will shift even more in the future. New movements will arise that will motivate young Christians to be involved in mission in new ways. Like Extinction Rebellion this groups will be multicultural and will grow organically from the grassroots. They will look very different from the mission agencies that we've grown used to over the years. I've no idea how they will deal with things like cross-cultural training and financial support, but they will work it out.

There is a tendency for people like me to wonder how we can harness and shape new movements like this, but we can't. Old people like me are foreigners in the new world in which these movements will evolve. Just as William Carey's ideas disturbed an earlier generation of church ministers, so I'm likely to find the new things that God is doing worldwide somewhat uncomfortable. That's fine, it's as it should be!

In a world in which Greta Thunberg can be named Time person of the year, it would seem perfectly normal for Christians with a similar passion for God's work to spring up and to inspire a generation of people across the globe. It may be uncomfortable when they do, but let's pray that it happens.

I know that climate change and the movements that surround it are a contentious subject for some people. However, these issues are not the point of this post, which is talking about the way in which new movements are evolving around the world. Please keep any comments on topic, I really don't want to have to moderate a discussion about climate change at this point.