MISSION AGENCIES: WHAT ARE THEY FOR?

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If you think mission today looks just the same as it did six months ago, you are not looking hard enough.
Category: Observations

When William Carey came up with the concept that led to the development of the modern mission agency he had one aim in view, societies which could support the sending of missionaries "for the conversion of the heathens". Carey's mission agencies were evangelistic in purpose and focussed on sending people into the "heathen" world. It's also worth noting in passing that the early mission agencies only engaged ordained men as missionaries and paid stipends to their staff.

This all changed with the coming of the faith missions, the first of which was the China Inland Mission (now OMF) founded in 1865. These organisations eschewed traditional fundraising practices and expected missionaries to look to God to provide for their needs. Being non-denominational, without links to any existing church structures, the faith missions were able to send missionaries who were not ordained and women were also engaged as mission workers in their own right, not just as wives. Faith missions proved to be a highly successful model and the number of mission agencies increased dramatically in the footsteps of the CIM.

Other changes in the way in which mission agencies work are highlighted by the American missiologist Ralph Winter. He suggested that the first agencies worked in the coastal areas where European colonial powers had settled. This was followed by a wave of agencies which moved to the hitherto unknown (by Westerners, that is) inland areas; spawning a whole group of agencies with the words "inland" or "interior" in their name. A third change occurred early in the last century when new agencies came into being which focussed on hidden, or unreached peoples. My own agency, Wycliffe Bible Translators is one of these (it is also a faith mission). There is a suggestion that Winter also considered the creation of a range of Christian relief and development agencies in the 1960s as another wave of agencies.

A third way of looking at changes in agencies comes from British mission thinker, Bryan Knell. He points out that the early organisations were called societies; they were a group of people gathered together for mutual support. The language focuses on the unity in the group. Today (as I have been doing in this post), we tend to refer to agencies; that is groups who are arranged around a task. The focus has shifted from relationship to activity.

A final thing to note in this little historical overview (which is examined in much greater detail in my book, due to appear sometime soon), is that the economic and power differential between the traditional mission sending countries and receiving countries has grown over the past two hundred years. Western countries, powered by industrialisation and colonialisation, have grown much richer and more powerful, while other countries have been left floundering in their wake. However, to some extent, this balance does seem to be being redressed in some places.

What all this means is that today's British mission agencies look very different to the original societies proposed by Carey. There is a clear genetic link between today's organisations and their forebears, but things have changed dramatically. Cultural, economic and religious trends have served to shape the agencies we know today.

The thing is, agencies need to continue to change as the world changes around us. The structures and approaches that served in the late 20th century are unlikely to be fit for purpose in the mid 21st and this need for change is accelerated by the Covid-19 outbreak. British agencies must adapt.

The early missionary societies existed in order to send missionaries to evangelise the world. They quickly added medical work, education and a raft of other activities to their portfolios. As time went on, other organisations grew up that focussed not so much on sending missionaries, but on making grants and donations to allow mission work, education and such like to carry on. However, at the same time as missionary approaches and strategies were adapting and changing, there has been a revolution in mission thinking. The traditional view is that mission is something that we do in obedience to God's command. It is all about human activity. Over the past fifty years or so, our understanding has developed so that we see that primarily, mission is something that God does and he calls us to participate in his actions. This is a subtle shift, but it changes everything - at lest it should. I wrote this a couple of years ago that looked at some practical ways in which this understanding of mission should change the ways in which agencies go about their business.

> *Missio DeiÂ changes how agencies work together. Mission agencies will say that they donâ€™t compete, but they all produce their own magazines, have their own branding, Twitter feeds, Facebook pages and what-have-yous. To the outsider, it certainly looks like competition. It is true that behind the publicity machine there is a good deal of cooperation in some areas â€“ especially when it comes to working together on the field. However, if we were serious about the idea that mission is Godâ€™s activity and not ours, we would be much less precious about organisational boundaries. I am convinced that many agencies in the UK could and should merge, creating stronger and more viable entities.*

The thing is, while the concerns in my earlier piece are still valid, Covid-19 has changed everything. Whatever your perspective on the pandemic and the rights and wrongs of government responses, it cannot be denied that God has shaken his church and the wider world through this outbreak. Old political alliances are shifting, the certainty that science could protect us suddenly looks less sure and the church around the world is stepping up to serve their communities in remarkable ways. Slow, generation-long cultural and religious changes which could have taken decades are working

out in a matter of years or even months.

If the disruption that we are living through had happened more slowly, agencies would have had time to adapt to them. They've adapted before and they could do so again - though the larger and more complicated they grow, the harder change is. However, we don't have a few decades to grow and adapt; the luxury of time is not available to us.

At this point, agencies are faced with a couple of alternatives; the one says that we know what it is we do, let's get on and do it while taking on board the financial and logistic challenges caused by Covid-19. This is safe, comfortable and likely to lead to irrelevancy. The more challenging option is to seriously and prayerfully explore what it is that God is doing in the world today. What does his mission look like when the majority of Christians are in the Global South, when ecological changes mean that zoonotic diseases are on the increase (this isn't the last pandemic that people alive today will live through), when frictions between nations and ethnic groups are on the rise and when billions of people still don't know Jesus? In this context, what does it look like for God "to reconcileÂ to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven,Â by making peaceÂ through his blood,Â shed on the cross" and what is our role - as Western Christians - in all of this?