ARE WE STILL NEEDED?

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Category: Observations

Please excuse a brief historical diversion...

In 1792, William Carey, a Baptist minister published the snappily titled An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens. By any standards, this is a remarkable book. It starts by setting out the biblical case for Christians being involved in world mission, then inspired by the voyages of Captain Cook and others, it goes on to survey the religious situation of the world, concluding that there is a great strategic need for mission. It is the final section of the book which is the most radical, however. Here, Carey suggests that Christians should establish societies (based on the model of the commercial societies which were doing such good business as world trade opened up) for spreading the Christian message around the world. This proposal provided the blueprint for the mission agencies which have been at the forefront of Protestant mission work for over 200 years. In fact, the basic structure of most agencies today is little removed from Carey's suggestion.

Carey's genius lay in understanding the biblical mandate for mission, analysing the world situation and coming up with a solution.

Today, the biblical mandate has not changed, but the world situation has. Carey wrote at a time when the Western world was broadly Christian and the rest of the world was not.Â This is simply no longer true.

Carey's proposal for the founding of mission agencies was a response to a situation which no longer exists; which poses a rather uncomfortable question for today's agencies. In short, are they still needed?

Often when I pose this question, people give a swift, indignant reply that of course agencies are still needed because there is still a need for Christian mission. However, this misses the point. Mission agencies and mission are not the same thing. Mission agencies are a relatively new innovation andÂ were a response to a particular situation. A *contextualised* response, if you like - and now the context has changed.

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Maintaining structures, for the sake of the structures is always a mistake. We keep programmes, meetings and even churches going long past their sell-buy dates. We are loyal to our institutions and we seek to maintain them when their purpose no longer exists or when they are no longer viable.Â We do this because we mistake our own institutions for God's bigger work.

So, where does this leave mission agencies? Put broadly, they will need to look very, very different in the future to the way they lookÂ now.Â I don't know what the specific answers are, but if the leadership and boards of mission agencies are not asking these questions, they are missing out on their responsibilities. Undoubtedly, some agencies will need to close or merge and it is better than

they think about this before it happens, rather than being forced into a situation in a panic.

Meanwhile, new structures and new types of agencies will develop all around the world as a new generation of Careys develop solutions to today's situation. God's mission will outlive our structures and will carry on till the earth is filled with the knowledge of the glory of God, as the waters cover the sea.