ISSUES FACING AGENCIES: BACKGROUND (1)

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A very quick trip through Protestant missionary history showing how the various forms of mission agencies came into being.
Category: Mission

There are times when it is almost impossible to come up with a snappy, attractive blog title and this is one of them. This post is the first in a series looking at the issues which mission agencies (especially those in the UK) face today. However, before we get to the exciting stuff, we need to do a bit of background work, so today we will be looking at where mission agencies actually came from. We are going to do a bit of history.

Please bear in mind that this is a blog post, it is not an essay or an academic paper. I don't have the space to get into all of the issues and I will make some generalisations. If you are really interested in reading more, I'll list a few good sources at the end of this post.

ManyÂ English speaking authors trace the origins of the Protestant mission movement to the publication of William Carey's snappily titled An Enquiry Into The Obligation of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens in 1792 (the full title goes on for a few more lines). However, one of the things that Carey sets out to do in his remarkable book is to assess the state of mission work at the time he was writing. It is clear that Carey sees himself not as the originator of a movement, but as someone following in the footsteps of others.

The others in this case are mostly German and Danish missionaries, in particular the MoraviansÂ who were the first, large scale protestant missionary church. The Moravians church sent out many missionaries directly from the church without the intervention of a specialist mission agency. The Moravian church was the agency.

What Carey did, that the Moravians had not done was to suggest the formation of a society dedicated to supporting and enabling mission work. Inspired by the voyages of Captain Cook and taking a lead from the commercial societies where where springing up at the time, Carey suggested the formation of an organisation, governed by a board which could facilitate mission. Within a very short time, this led to the founding of the Baptist Missionary Society, with other agencies following on. Most of the societies founded in the aftermath of Carey's initiative were denominational in basis. The missionaries they sent out ordained ministers as clergy and had they maintained close links to their founding denomination.

The next significant step in the story of mission agencies was the founding of the China Inland Mission (now OMF International) by James Hudson-Taylor in 1865. The China Inland MissionÂ (CIM) was different to the existing mission agencies in a number of significant ways;

- they were non-denominational, with no formal ties to any particular church.
- they accepted lay-people as missionaries at a time when most other societies only accepted ordained clergy.
- they saw women as missionaries in their own right, not simply as wives or carers.
- they did not pay salaries to their missionaries, but expected them to look to God in faith for the provision of funds.

The founding of the CIM was swiftly followed by numerous other "faith missions" and, today, most mission agencies fit broadly into this classification.

Though there have been some tweaks to the way in which missions function, the patterns set by Carey and Hudson-Taylor are those used by missions today. Agencies are for the most part, autonomous organisations governed by a board, who support mission work in one way or another. Some agencies have close ties to churches and denominations and many of these such, as the Baptist Missionary Society, trace their origins to the post-Carey era. However, the vast majority of agencies have no formal links to churches and denominations apart from those which already exist through their mission partners and staff.

However, the last couple of decades has seen the rediscovery of the Moravian pattern of mission. Many new church streams, such as NFI, have reverted to sending out missionaries directly without the intermediary of a mission agency. This new/rediscovered pattern for mission support has different strengths and weaknesses to the traditional agency pattern.

Very briefly put, this is how we got to where we are today. I've deliberately avoided questions of mission strategy, where the societies sent there people and what they did; we'll come back to that later.

It is also important to note in passing that Protestant mission history represents a small (though significant) slice of the 2,000 year life of the Church. There are other patterns of mission which fall outside of this rubric but which may be worth exploring.

If you are interested in reading more about mission history, these are some resources that I've found very helpful in my studies over the past few months.

- Bebbington, D.W., 2005. The Dominance of Evangelicalism, Leicester: Inter Varsity Press.
- *Cox, J., 2009. The British Missionary Enterprise since 1700, London: Routledge.*
- *Fiedler, K., 1994. The Story of Faith Missions, Oxford: Regnum.*
- Stanley, B. ed., 2001. Christian Missions and the Englightenment, Cambridge: Eerdmans.
- Stanley, B., 2013. The Global Diffusion of Evangelicalism, Nottingham: Inter Varsity Press.