

Field-Governed Mission Structures

Part IV: William Carey and the Serampore Trio

by Joseph & Michele C.



William Carey is popularly known among Protestants as “the father of modern missions.” Though the Moravians and the pietist mission of Halle had been sending small numbers of Protestant missionaries for a few decades before William Carey, it was Carey’s creation in 1792 of the Baptist Missionary Society and his departure for India that effectively launched the Protestant missionary movement. Following Carey’s example, several Protestant missionary societies were founded in rapid succession over the next twenty years in Europe and in North America. Because of William Carey’s influence and example, the previously tiny numbers of Protestant missionaries grew exponentially to become a substantial force for the first time. In what follows below we will examine Carey’s missionary career with a special focus on issues of mission governance and its impact on field effectiveness.

The Founding of the Baptist Missionary Society

William Carey, a shoemaker who became a Baptist minister, knew the value of studying history and he was “a keen student of the history of missions.” He saw the missionary mandate clearly in the New Testament and felt that it was an integral part of the Christian faith (George, p. 35). Among those who influenced Carey in his study of missions history were Justin Martyr, Zwingli, Calvin, the Moravians, John Eliot, and David Brainerd. Carey’s famous *Enquiry* demonstrates his zeal to do whatever was necessary for the gospel to reach all nations. “Carey’s pamphlet (sic) was a reasoned statement of Christian obligation, of world needs, of existing opportunities, and practical proposals for the formation of a missionary society” (Walker, p. 68). It is no wonder then that Carey was instrumental in the founding of the Baptist Missionary Society. “His immediate aim was the formation of a society for sending out missionaries, and the publication of his pamphlet (sic) was merely a step toward the realization of that aim” (Walker, p. 78). It is important for the context of this paper to understand just how central Carey was in the formation of this Missionary Society. “There can be no question as to who was the moving spirit in the founding of the Baptist Missionary Society, Ryland, in his *Life and Death of Fuller*, says: ‘I must consider the Mission as originating absolutely with Carey’” (Walker, p. 84).

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Overview of Carey's Life

Again to give some context to our study let us look at some important dates in Carey's life. In addition to giving context to our study, this brief overview in the form of a timetable of Carey's life also shows how much he accomplished, how diligently and sacrificially he worked and some of the great adversity he suffered throughout his life. An understanding of these things helps to put into perspective the severity of the treatment that he and the rest of the Serampore Trio received later in their lives at the hands of the home sponsors who succeeded Andrew Fuller and the other original friends who had "held the ropes" for those on the field during the early years of their work (This time line is taken largely from George's *Faithful Witness*, pp. xv, xvi).

1781 (About age 20)

Married his first wife, Dorothy Plackett

1783 (Age 22)

Baptized by John Ryland at Northampton.

1785 (24)

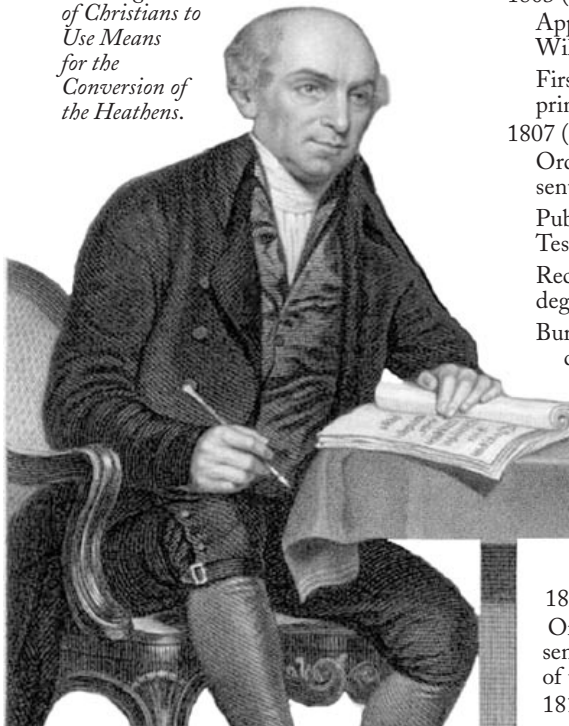
Called to pastor a Baptist chapel at Moulton.

1789 (28)

Called to pastor Baptist church in Leicester.

1792 (31)

Carey published *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens*.



1793 (32)

Carey and Dr. John Thomas, are commissioned as missionaries to Bengal, India.

Sailed with his family from Dover and after five months at sea arrived in Calcutta, India as illegal aliens.

Moved to Bendel, 30 miles up the Hooghly River.

1794 (33)

Settled in the Sunderbunds jungle near Debhatta.

Moved to Mudnabatty, near Malda, to work as an indigo planter.

His son, Peter, died at age five of dysentery. Dorothy, his wife, became increasingly depressed and mentally ill.

1797 (36)

Completed his first draft of a translation of the New Testament into Bengali.

1798 (37)

Established, despite much opposition, first school of a large network of indigenous schools with instruction in Bengali.

1799 (38)

Moved to Kidderpore to establish his own indigo plantation.

1800 (39)

Moved to Serampore and joined with William Ward and Joshua and Hannah Marshman to form a missionary community.

1803 (42)

Baptized the first Hindu to believe in Christ through his ministry.

1803 (42)

Appointed professor in Fort William College in Calcutta.

First Bengali New Testament printed by the Serampore Press.

1807 (46)

Ordained his son Felix who was sent as a missionary to Burma.

Published Sanskrit New Testament.

Received the doctor of divinity degree from Brown University.

Buried his first wife Dorothy who died of a fever.

1808 (47)

Married his second wife Charlotte Rumohr.

1812 (51)

Serampore's printing presses destroyed in a fire along with years of translation work.

1814 (53)

Ordained his son Jabez who was sent as a missionary to Amboyna of the Moluccan islands.

1815 (54)

Mourned the death of good friend, Andrew Fuller.

Endured increased tensions between the Baptist Missionary Society in England and the Serampore Mission.

1818 (57)

Founded Serampore College.

1820 (59)

Organized the Agricultural and Horticultural Society of India.

1821 (60)

Mourned the death of his beloved second wife, Charlotte.

1822 (61)

Mourned the death of his son, Felix, and of good friend and first Hindu convert, Krishna Pal.

1823 (62)

Married his third wife, Grace Hughes.

Mourned the death of his close colleague, William Ward.

1829 (68)

Indian authorities legally proscribed Suttee – the burning to death of widows – the practice of which Carey had long fought to see outlawed.

1830 (69)

The Serampore Mission was placed in financial jeopardy by the crash of the Calcutta banking houses.

1834

Died at Serampore at age 72.

The Early Years

Before and through the process of the formation and early activities of the Baptist Missionary Society, Carey developed close friendships with several men who became the ones who committed to "hold the ropes" for him while he was in India. This was the analogy Carey used to illustrate his relationship with those who would stay back in England supporting him in whatever way they could. These friends included Fuller, Ryland, Sutcliff and Pearce (Walker, p. 67). Telling of the early days of the Baptist Missionary Society, Deaville Walker writes,

For the first time we see Carey surrounded by colleagues throwing themselves unsparingly into the campaign. The ability of Ryland, the influence of Fuller, the eloquence of Sutcliff, and the enthusiasm of Pearce are now linked unreservedly with the faith and courage of Carey (Walker, p. 89).

Miller refers to those four as the old guard. They knew Carey well and esteemed him highly. Those four main home supporters worked hard to raise financial and prayer support for the missionaries in India, but they were not without influence.

Carey and Thomas in the beginning made decisions on the field as to the workings and details of their ministry. For example, at one point they wanted or needed “to live less expensively” and so decided to move “up the river to Bendal.” Not much later, they realized that:

Bendal, being a Portuguese settlement was inhabited by a mixed population. Carey believed a place more purely Indian would better serve their purpose. Hence it was decided to go to Nadia the ‘Hindu Oxford’ of Bengal... Carey was well received by the scholarly Hindus who recognized his linguistic ability... (However), no land for cultivation was available at this settlement. Farming had been a part of Carey’s overall plan for self-support. Money was running low. At this time Thomas was recalled to Calcutta because of pressing debts” (Miller, pp. 52-53).

Carey decided to move with his family to the Sunderbunds, a jungle forest area where he had the opportunity to secure “some land ...for three years rent free... On February 6, 1794, with enough food for one meal, the family landed at Dechatta” (Miller, p. 55).

Not many months later, still in 1794, Carey and his family moved again taking a three-week trip to move 250 miles to Mudnabatty which became their first permanent place to settle since leaving Leicester in England. George Udney had offered him a position on his plantation there with a salary “of 250 pounds... per year (and)... a share in the proceeds of the business should it succeed.” (Carey believed from the beginning that missionaries should become self-supporting as soon as possible after arriving on the field.) More significantly, the new position also gave Carey “for the first time a legal standing in British India, preventing (his) peremptory expulsion by the East India Company.” He surely also welcomed the fellowship of his former co-worker Thomas again, as Carey had felt very lonely and isolated living in Dechatta

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without any Christian fellowship outside of his family.

Each decision Carey made to move was based on his knowledge of the situation, the opportunities available to him and the search for what would help him best to reach the Indians with the gospel and to establish a Christian community among them.

The business operation was never an end in itself. Rather it was the God-provided means to accomplish a larger, worthier ideal. As Carey reminded himself, ‘If, after God has so wonderfully made way for us, I should neglect the very work for which I came thither, the blackest brand of guilt and infamy must lie upon my soul (George, p. 106).

Unfortunately,

Communication between Carey and his supporters back home was slow and uncertain due to the continuing hostilities between England and France. Carey’s first letter to the society, written on board ship before he reached India, was not received until a year later when he was already settled at Mudnabatty.

In August 5, 1794, still having received no communication from his “friends who had pledged to ‘hold the ropes’ for” Carey, he wrote to the society, “Surely you have not forgotten us.” Carey believed that missionaries should become self-supporting as soon as possible after arriving on the field in order to free up “money raised at home to be used in starting new missions endeavors. In the (same) letter of August 1794 ...Carey informed the society he would no longer require their monetary assistance, thanks to the business agreement he and Thomas now had with Udney” (George, p. 106).

Back home in Northamptonshire, Carey’s letter was received with suspicion and alarm. They had not sent Carey to India to become an entrepreneur! Was he intending to make himself rich by this new scheme? Such

questions arose primarily from newer members of the society, with less personal knowledge of Carey than the old stalwarts. At a meeting when Fuller was absent, they fired off a curt letter to Mudnabatty questioning the wisdom of the indigo plantation. They insinuated that Carey was a money grubber for whom ‘the spirit of the missionary’ had been swallowed up by ‘the pursuits of the merchant’ (George, pp. 106-107).

Carey was deeply offended when this letter finally made its way into his hands in January 1796. He refused to grovel or justify his actions: ‘If my conduct will not vindicate itself, it is not worth vindicating.’ All the same, he responded with a stern blast of his own. He was putting upwards of one-third of his income from the indigo works back into the mission. He vigorously denied that the love of money had motivated his course of action. ‘I am indeed poor, and shall always be so, till the Bible is published in Bengali and Hindostani.’ Besides, the society had contributed less than 200 pounds to his support the three years he had been in India. Hardly the basis for so censorious an attack! Fuller was able to smooth over the misunderstanding and restore friendly relations between the society and their premier missionary-pioneer. Still, this episode foreshadowed even greater difficulties in the future. Those problems too involved the financial integrity of the mission. Unfortunately, they would prove impossible to resolve once the mediating hands of Fuller had been removed by death (George, p. 107).

In his translation work Carey made decisions which he felt were a strategic part of reaching Indians for Christ, but his friends back home did not always understand. In addition to translating the Bible into Sanskrit, the sacred language of ancient Hindu civilization, Carey also published a Sanskrit dictionary and grammar and translated “many of the great epics of the Hindu tradition such as the Ramayana, a poem comparable in scope to Homer’s Iliad

and Odyssey. When Fuller read Carey's translation of these Hindu writings, he wondered whether his dear friend were not wasting his time on such 'obscene' literature" (George, p. 142).

In the face of such objections, Carey continued to work with texts from the corpus of sacred Hindu writings. He had three reasons for doing so. First, he felt that he could not adequately counter the arguments of the Brahmins unless he knew first-hand their own Scriptures. Second, by mastering these writings, he was better able to translate the Bible into Sanskrit, and so offer a positive witness to the gospel. Finally, there was an economic motive. Because there was a demand for such texts, their publication was a profitable venture for the Serampore Press (George, pp. 142-143).

Once again Carey made decisions based on a first-hand knowledge of the situation, opportunities available to him and with a desire to do what was best for the work of the gospel in the Indian context.

It would appear that in the early years there were some tensions between the missionaries on the field and the home base especially with regard to disagreements which the home base colleagues had about Carey's decision to be involved in business in order to support himself and in order to contribute to the mission and with regard to decisions related to his translation work. However, because a strong bond of mutual trust and admiration had been formed with Fuller and a few of the others before Carey left for the field. For the most part Carey and his close colleagues governed the work on the field and the problems did not become severe until later when the original "rope-holding" team all passed away.

Later Tensions with New Home-Base Brethren

Even the overview above does not fully reveal the multitude of trials Carey endured. In addition to his wife's mental illness (which caused her more than once to try to kill Carey) and the death of his son Peter, he and his family suffered continual health crises, dire financial straits to the point of severe poverty, no response to the gospel for the first several years, grave disappoint-

ments and persecution by both Indians and British, not to mention the most severe climatic conditions and danger from tigers, poisonous snakes, alligators and, of course, malaria.

In view of all of these trials, one is impressed by Carey's description of the severity of the tensions that later developed between those at the Serampore mission and the newcomers in the Baptist Missionary Society back in England who sought to govern their affairs, when Carey writes home to those who sought to rule in a high-handed manner: "I have scarcely ever written under such distress of mind." It seems he had a lot of cause for distress of mind since sailing for India, but he puts these tensions above most other causes for distress of mind. Carey goes on to write,

We are yours to live and die for, but as your brothers, not as your servants. I beseech you, therefore, not to attempt to exercise a power over us to which we shall never submit... I do hope that the ideas of domination which Fuller never thought of, but which the Society has imbibed since his death, will be given up (Winter, 1991, p. C-5).

An ominous event in the history of the Serampore Mission occurred on May 7, 1815, when Andrew Fuller died at age 61. He had been the chief spokesman, fund-raiser, and arbitrator for Carey and his associates since the founding of the society in 1792. Without his steadying presence, the delicate relationship between the missionaries on the field and the sponsors back home began to unravel. Carey, Marshman, and Ward were falsely accused of building up personal fortunes at the expense of the mission. At one point Carey replied that were he to die on the spot, his wife would hardly have enough money to pay for his coffin! True, the Serampore schools and publishing ventures had brought in large sums—far more than the paltry gifts they had received from England—but these resources, along with Carey's Fort William salary, had been plowed back into the mission.

Carey resented the arrogant tone which the new home secretary, John Dyer, used in his correspondence. "I cannot write to Mr. Dyer," he said. "All of his communications are like those of a secretary of state, and not, as was formerly the case, with dear

Dr. Fuller, those of a Christian friend." To make matters worse, a team of younger missionaries, led by Carey's own nephew Eustace, set up a rival church and mission station in Calcutta quite independently of the Serampore leaders. The society backed the younger men (who had spread false rumors about Carey, Ward and Marshman) and continued to press Carey and the Serampore Mission to surrender all property rights and strategic decision-making to them. Eventually this dispute led to an open schism between Carey and the society his vision had first called into being. Carey lamented this breach, for he knew squabbling among Christians could only hurt the cause of missions. (George, p. 164-165).

Further indications of the change in the home viewpoint was the 'assigning' of Pearce (the son of Carey's good friend, Samuel Pearce) and his wife when they arrived in August of 1817, to 'reside in the Serampore family, Ward's colleagues in the press.' This was an innovation that touched the Serampore family rather unpleasantly. Hitherto, those who joined them had done so after the various parties had become acquainted, and then by unanimous vote they were assigned their task. This seemed another indication of the ironclad authority England intended to maintain over mission affairs. Consequently, Carey wrote Ryland, saying: 'I have scarcely ever written under such distress of mind... My heart is exceedingly wounded'" (Miller, p. 129).

In this case the BMS in England were not only continuing to press for the surrender of all strategic decision-making to them, but they were actually forcing their decisions on Carey and the Serampore mission by assigning the Pearces to live in the Serampore mission and to take on the particular task of working with Ward in the printing press work without consulting the missionaries who would be most affected by this decision.

Carey did not expect the British board to be without power. He and Marshman did ultimately turn over most financial and real estate assets of the Serampore properties to the board's legal control. In earlier days Carey had written Fuller on numerous occasions reporting about the work (and even asking for Fuller's opinion in certain matters.) The "inno-

vation” which troubled them most was “the role of making assignments of personnel, the role of making supervisory

energy, diminishing their contribution to contextual reflection on how to penetrate Asia further for Christ.

Brotherhood.” However, “this plea was ultimately denied, and the feared expulsion of the Trio became a reality” (Winter, 1992b, p. 2).

In Summary

So it becomes clear that when the Serampore Mission structure was led and governed on the field, the field workers were freed up to do the work effectively of proclaiming the good news and of building up a Christian community. Living in community as a team, they had mutual accountability to one another and had to learn mutual submission and mutual trust and service. (They had agreed for the most part to hold all things in common. They ate their meals together and prayed together twice every day as a group.) When the home board changed hands and the newcomers who did not know the field workers very well took it upon themselves to wield much greater authority than the original group had exercised and in a manner that demonstrated suspicion and distrust, they created a great emotional strain for the field missionaries whose effectiveness in their work was seriously diminished. The original structure worked with the original “rope-holders”, because they had formed significant trusting relationships with the field workers.

It seems that there had also been an understanding, whether spoken or unspoken, about what the role of the home board would be and just how much authority they would have. When newcomers, with surely all the best intentions, came into that structure without having formed those relationships of trust and without a mutual understanding of what their role was to be, great problems arose. There are lessons here to be learned about communication, relationships, trust, reconciliation and placement of authority. We can learn also from these events about the benefits of field governance and about the proper role of a home board as it seeks to supervise and assist its missionaries in the effective work of the gospel. It is a job which needs to be done with great thoughtfulness and with much prayer and with mutual understanding by both home board and missionaries of given roles and of places of authority and decision-making.

In comparison to all the other challenges they had faced, these problems with the home board were the most distressing.

and administrative decisions. They did not feel that was the beneficial function of the board” (Winter, 1990, p. C-5).

So it was not the idea of financial accountability that bothered them so much, although they easily felt it was unreasonable for the board to demand so much financial control when the large majority of the money to build the mission properties and to support the national workers came from the missionaries themselves. But what really concerned them was the idea that the board in Britain felt that they were in a position to make supervisory and administrative decisions about the work and the living arrangements of the missionaries on the field without even consulting the missionaries themselves and without any first-hand knowledge of the situation or the context in which the missionaries lived and worked. Carey felt that the missionaries should work as brothers in relation to the home board, not as hired servants.

These tensions between the home base and the workers on the field had a direct impact on the effectiveness of the Baptist Mission Society’s work in India. A. Christopher Smith describes this as follows:

Greater value needed to be set on sanctified relationships between home and abroad, in place of all the strain and distrust that had dogged their steps over the past decade. Otherwise, the whole work would grind to a halt. Internal hassle was bogging the work down, to the dismay of the field workers who wished to move ahead with freedom to win the masses, to the glory of God (Smith, p. 191).

Sad to say, such hassles prevented Carey and Marshman from focusing their thought more creatively on effective mission strategy in the field. Problems generated from the home base sapped away at their

They grieved over the self-defeating tendency of the BMS ‘apparatus for missionary efforts’; they were appalled that missionaries had been virtually reduced to the status of ‘mere stipendiary servants’ obliged to obey the keepers-of-the-purse in Britain. They felt depersonalized and found it ever more difficult to face daunting evangelistic odds. Serious inefficiency resulted (Smith, p.191).

In 1825 both Ward and the Marshmans after 26 years on the field, left the field for their first furlough “with the express purpose of putting the working relationship between Serampore and the BMS committee on firmer footing” (Smith, p. 190). However, “it was not until 1830 that the matter was adjusted satisfactorily” (Miller, p. 131). It is clear that when the British board tried to govern the missionaries work from Britain, there was a great difficulty created for the missionaries, which hindered their work and drained them emotionally, spiritually and physically. These problems made Carey physically ill. “So greatly did all these discords prey upon his mind that he became seriously ill” (Miller, p. 128). Marshman and Ward felt the need to go back in person to Britain to try to work out these problems. Of Carey, Miller wrote “...during the sixteen years of persecution by his English brethren he had been greatly abased” (Miller, p. 135). In comparison to all the other challenges they had faced these problems with the home board were the most distressing.

In the end Carey and the other missionaries transferred the property rights of the Serampore mission to the home board, but agreed with the home board that the original missionaries would continue to live there without paying any rent during their lifetimes. Marshman wrote the home board in 1825 asking for the “recognition of the autonomy of the Serampore

In conclusion, some of Winter's insights regarding external and internal boards are helpful in this study:

External boards are often located culturally and geographically at a very great distance, and have inevitable limitations of perspective. Intuitively, those in the team at Serampore recognized the importance of a self-governing structure (Winter, 1992b, p. 2).

The issue is basically whether or not society in general... will concede the same measure of autonomy to a group of missionaries working together as is normally conceded to members of local church bodies, which always have 'internal' boards (Winter, 1992b, p. 2).

Both Carey and Taylor began with a short covenant-like document early in their experience with a field team. The Serampore Trio's Form of Government (was) a short but weighty document... created on the field and written by field leaders... (However), these field produced 'rules' elicited substantial opposition from those at home who had nothing to do with their creation and whose structural concept was that of a governing board of outsiders rather than a governing council of insiders (Winter, 1992b, p. 8).

External boards have one commonly accepted reason for being: an external board of directors allows outsiders to monitor the use of funds derived from donors who are not a part of the organization. This is a very legitimate concern. It is important for... organizations to surrender to outside, uninvolved, impartial observation every use they make of donated funds. This is one reason for an outside public financial audit.

On the other hand, an undesirable aspect of an external board is that it is less likely than an internal board to be close to the work, either geographically, or culturally, or to the daily heart-beat of a cross-cultural ministry (Winter, 1992b, p. 9, emphasis his).

The pressure to do what (the external) donors think best is a subtle and powerful force. This perspective is enhanced, and in part originates, from a subtle distrust on the part of

the people back home of the often unconventional complex of factors field workers must take into account (Winter, 1992, p. 9).

Winter concludes by writing about the Serampore Brotherhood:

There is no way the incredible output of that handful of missionaries can be explained apart from the two chief features of the Serampore Brotherhood: the commitment to mutual personal accountability and interdependence, and the freedom (for a few years at least) of this field team to make its own decisions and work out its own assignments and strategies without the interference of an external board of directors. In this regard the Serampore example seems surely to have great and crucial lessons for many new mission agencies today (Winter, 1992, p. 10). **IJFM**

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