

The Strange Structure of Mission Agencies

Part I: Still Two Structures after all these Years?

by Robert A. Blincoe

Some of church history's greatest pioneers—Samuel Zwemer, Mother Teresa, William Carey—did not wait to get permission before they started new mission structures. They began, attracted others to the task, and only subsequently were they honored by their church's government for their leadership. Samuel Zwemer and James Cantine, the first American missionaries to Arabia, were told by the Reformed Church of America that “lack of funds” prohibited their appointment.¹ So they raised their support directly from congregations and formed the Arabia Mission and sailed to what is Bahrain today. Four years later their denomination adopted them as missionaries. Or consider John R. Mott. Mott was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1946, fifty years after his pioneering work with the YMCA and the Student Volunteer Movement. As a young man Mott had envisioned new “task” structures to meet mission needs that denominational organizations could not meet. Today's new denominations—Vineyard, People of Destiny Calvary Chapel—as well as older, mainline churches should look for pioneers who are already working “without permission” to accomplish tasks that congregations have never done well.

Denominational governments should monitor these upstart “task” structures, in the same way that county governments or state governments monitor private industry. These two in combination—denominational government and private enterprise (mission agency)—are the “two structures of God's redemptive mission” that Ralph Winter identified more than three decades ago.² A task structure (mission agency) registers with and reports to the government structure (church denomination). Tension between the two is normative, but this is not to say that they work at cross-purposes. Mission agencies—Habitat for Humanity, the American Bible Society, Youth with a Mission—turn out a “product”, while a denominational government—Presbyterian, Baptist, Calvary Chapel—has the task of monitoring the “quality control” of the mission agencies. (Of course, mission agencies are responsible to monitor themselves as well; hence their membership in the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability, their external audits, etc.)

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We should not fault the denominations for not doing the work of mission agencies. John Buchanan, moderator of the Presbyterian Church (PCUSA) 208th General Assembly (1996-1997), wished aloud for a mission order in the Presbyterian Church which would bring volunteer Christians to work and live in urban hot spots.³ Buchanan said, "What if Presbyterians made a three year commitment to a mission order, and lived out their Christian faith in poverty-wracked neighborhoods?" Someone else (World Impact) has been doing this for four decades. The Presbyterians need not, and probably cannot create a "top down" mission order to do what World Impact is already doing; so the Presbyterian government should write a Memo of Understanding with World Impact and take advantage of the structure that is already in place. Buchanan's wish will remain only a dream unless Presbyterians and other denominations take advantage of "task-oriented" mission societies.

Protestant denominations, whether old or newly forming, exist to either increase the size of existing congregations or start daughter congregations within the same culture as the mother church. This is "growing the church where it already is". When the new denominations finally turn their attention to the unfinished task of church planting ("going to where the church is not") they will either have to permit their pioneering members to start a "task" structure within the church or write a memo of understanding with an existing mission structure. Flexibility is what the denominations need if they are going to keep the money and the missionaries under their own supervision. We can learn a lesson from the Roman Catholic Church. The Catholics, famously centralized, have proven flexible to permit its entrepreneurial members to begin structures and attract bands of men and women to do good words. Consider, for example, Mother Teresa's mission order.

Mother Teresa's Great Contribution

Mother Teresa did not win the Nobel Peace Prize for helping poor people on the streets of Calcutta. (Did you

suppose that the world noticed when she dedicated her life to the overlooked, underfed, indigent poor of India?) What was her most valuable contribution? Mother Teresa's greatness emerged when she multiplied her effective work by beginning, and sustaining, a missionary order.



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Called the Order of the Missionaries of Charity, Mother Teresa attracted hundreds of women to follow her. She led them in following Christ, in feeding the hungry, and in comforting the dying. Multiply her work by a thousand pairs of hands, doing good in a hundred dark corners of the world, and the value of Mother Teresa's contribution comes to light.

Her dedication to the poor made Mother Teresa good; her ability to organize and run a missionary order made her great.

The Catholic Church, despite its famous centralization, has found a way to make come true the outside-the-lines ideas of its entrepreneurial members. Francis of Assisi (d. 1226) heard God's call to a "new kind of knighthood,"⁴ and founded what others called the Franciscans. Their simple vow: "To follow the teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to walk in His footsteps." The order numbered 5000 by the time of Francis' death. This new kind of knighthood became a significant alternative to the misguided Crusades.

A missionary order begins as the vision of an entrepreneur who identifies a task, begins his or her work on the task, and then gets permission from a certified agency.⁵ Mother Teresa founded her order in 1948, and Pope Pius XII subsequently sanctioned it in

1950. In 1968 the Vatican summoned her to Rome to found a home for the poor there; she staffed it primarily with Indian nuns from Calcutta.

Luther and the 250 Years of Silence

When Luther dismantled of the church's monastic structures it brought about an unforeseen and deleterious effect. The Lutheran church had no means for mission to the non-Christian world. While Luther believed in the proclamation of the gospel for all the world, when he spoke of mission he meant to the "repaganized" (verheindischte) Christian Church.⁶ It is not necessary, to say with Gustav Warneck, that Luther was indifferent to missions. Luther said, "Nobody should hear the gospel for himself only, but everyone should tell those who do not know it." But the historian Stephen Neill says that Luther did "exceedingly little" to put such insight into practice.⁷

Calvin as well pressed for the end of monastic structures, and likewise ended up with no means to move his message beyond the Christianized world. It was not that Protestants did not traverse land and sea; they did, for profit. Catholics missionaries, meanwhile, for the sake of the Great Commission pushed the limits of knowledge and exploration until they reached India, China, Japan, Vietnam, Africa, the South Seas, and the Americas.

A more practical proof of the need for mission structures could hardly be provided than the painful questions posed by the Jesuit historian, Johann Baegert. He says, in effect, "We know why the Protestants are heretics: because they have no missions." From 1751 to 1768 Baegert, a German, was a Jesuit missionary among the Indians of Lower California. In January 1771 Baegert published his *Observations in Lower California*, a translation of which was brought out in 1952 by the University of California Press at Berkeley. Baegert inserts "Some Questions Directed to the Protestants":

The Protestants have the best opportunity of carrying out the work of converting nonbelievers in both the West and the East Indies, for there, as everyone knows, their trade and power is very great. It

would be much easier for them and they would be more successful than the Catholics, for they have nothing else to preach to the pagans but their doctrine of faith . . . Nevertheless, I have not heard or read anything up to now about Protestant missions or missionaries in the East or West Indies.

Therefore, with their permission, I ask these Protestant gentlemen:

If the Apostles had remained in their fatherland, sitting at home behind the stove, where would the world and especially our Germany be today? When will one be able to say of the theologians of Wittenberg and Geneva: Their call went out into the world and they have been heard in all the corners of the earth preaching the Gospel to the pagans. (Psalm 18.) Daily preachers are born to take the place of Luther and Calvin, but none to convert the heathen.

I ask, does the definite command of Christ, "Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature" (Mark 16), include the Protestant preachers, or does it not? If Christ's command has no meaning for them, then they cannot be counted among successors of the Apostles, but only as followers and partisans of Luther and Calvin.

What of the particular prophecy of Christ in Matthew 24 that, before the end of the world arrives, the Gospel shall be preached everywhere and to all nations? It is certain that if, on the one hand, the Protestants have the only true Gospel and religion in their possession, and on the other hand, their preachers will not do better in the future than they have done in the past two and a half centuries in preaching the Gospel among the heathen, then the Judgment Day will never dawn.

If Protestant preachers fear misfortune and death, and perhaps for this reason lack courage and do not dare to venture among foreign nations and barbarians, why then do they not show any concern for the eternal salvation of their colonial slaves in America and the Negro slaves from Guinea and elsewhere. Surely from them they have nothing to fear.

In contrast, the Roman Catholic missionaries are dedicated to the conversion of heathen. To teach and baptize the unbelievers the missionaries travel throughout the world,

penetrating into regions where no profit-hungry merchant nor daring pioneer has ever been before. Like St. Paul, they fear no dangers, but suffer shipwreck, hunger, and thirst, and dwell in deserts. They risk their lives a hundred times and spill their blood in a hundred different ways. Meanwhile, the Protestant lip servant puts his hands in his pockets and watches indifferently the horrors of idolatry in so many lands. He lets millions of black and white pagans perish . . . not in the least bothering or thinking of coming to their aid, in spite of God's explicit command to help them and save them from eternal damnation.

What do we learn from Baegert's painful criticism? That the problem preventing some Protestant denominations from "making disciples among all the ethnē" is not theological but structural. If the governing powers ("grow the church where it is") do not permit and monitor the pioneer missionaries to "grow the church where it is not" then God will find other ways and other structures to complete His task of world evangelization.

We owe to William Carey the recovery of the means of apostolic church-planting. Here is Carey's original proposal:

Suppose 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.⁸

So Carey and thousands of serious Christians formed themselves into societies. It was as though the Holy Spirit had been blowing past the Protestants, who had to hoist small sails to catch the divine wind. Those sails are the missionary structures of the church. Since Carey wrote these words pioneer church-planters have expanded the influence of the Bible to every continent. Push a pin into every country of the world where the church is meeting, and you will cover the map

with pins. In 1942 the Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, referred to this amazing success as "the great new fact of our era." There are more Anglican bishops in Nigeria today than in England and the United States (Episcopalians) combined.

However, it's still too soon to lower the sails. Did we suppose that the task was finished because the church is present in nearly every political nation? You know already that when you peel back the man-made maps, you reveal the task remaining. That is, the challenge of the peoples (not countries) of the world which are still without churches within their cultures.

Conclusion

As I write, the President of the United States has just flown over wild fires burning in Arizona. He said all that damage was a shame, and declared that it was a disaster. Meanwhile down below among him the trees, highly motivated teams of elite volunteer firefighters known as "hot shots" have arrived from all over the country on a mission to save the forests. The government will provide bulldozers and shovels to overworked volunteers whose passion is to fight and win a battle to rescue a piece of the planet. These two structures—government and bands of men and women on the ground—should recognize that they really do need each other to finish the task.

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- Kasdorf, Hans
1980 "The Reformation and Mission: A Bibliographical Survey of Secondary Literature", *Occasional Bulletin of Missionary Research*, January 1980.

Endnotes

¹The swirl of student zeal blew into the narthexes of the mainline churches. Not that the fresh wind was uniformly welcomed. Lansing et al. comprised an autonomous group that the organized church was not ready to touch. Lack of funds was said to be the reason. So Zwemer and Cantine brought into being the Arabian Mission, members of which pledged to give financial support. Much of the support came from the Midwest, which was emerging from its pioneer poverty, yet without the theological reserve of the East Coast denominational leadership. Zwemer's family contributed much energy. On the failing of Lansing's health, another professor took over. After four years on the field, the Reformed Church in America embraced the Arabian Mission and officially took it on. Dr. John Beardslee, New Brunswick Seminary, April 1989 at the Arabia Mission Centennial.

²Winter, Ralph D. "The Two Structures of Gods Redemptive Mission," in *Missiology: An International Review*, Vol. II, No. 1, January 1974, pp. 121-139, reprinted in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*, William Carey Library, 1999.

³Buchanan was speaking at the PCUSA Synod Rally at Bel Air Presbyterian Church, February 1997.

⁴*Encyclopedia Britannica*, Chicago, 1991.

⁵Characteristics of Catholic Mission Orders 1. Voluntary, deeper commitment 2. Response to a challenge 3. Stress on both devotion and active involvement 4. Task forces ready for any good work 5. An organizational esprit de corps 6. Amazing durability (of purpose and existence) 7. Stress on Christian basics 8. A normative pattern of discipline beyond that of ordinary church members. Gannon, Thomas M., S.J. "Catholic Religious Orders in Sociological Perspective" in Scherer, Ross P. (ed.), *American Denominational Organization: A Sociological View*, William Carey Library, 1980.

⁶Kasdorf 1980:170.

⁷Luther's attitude was at least partly due to unfavorable circumstances, which James Scherer states as: a desperate shortage of preachers at home; no Protestant monastic orders; preoccupation with the Protestant struggle for existence in Europe; and lack of contacts with non-Christian lands and peoples (Anderson 1998:416).

⁸Reprinted in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*, p. 299, 1999 edition.

Book Reviews

Changing India: Insights from the Margin

By Robin Thomson, B. R. Publishing Corporation, New Delhi, 2002, pp. 174 + xviii, no price listed.

reviewed by H. L. Richard

The subtitle of this book is strikingly significant; it is written from and about the margins of Indian society, and yet seems to be an appeal to the mainstream.

The book commends Christianity (or at times the way of Jesus) as India's great need. It is a semi-autobiographical account centering on 8-10 Christian ministries that the author is familiar with. It contains in its concluding chapters both a defense of conversion and a subtle appeal to the reader to convert.

As Christian apologetics the book deserves high marks in its gentle and balanced approach, with an emphasis on the practical rather than theoretical. A book about social problems in India written by a Christian that maintains a level and balanced tone is rare indeed, and the lack of condescending tone and finger-pointing at other religions reflect very favourably on the author.

But one wonders who the book was written for. Published in India, it would seem to be for an Indian audience. Yet at numerous points it is clearly directed to non-Indians (and at points to non-resident Indians). At times it is to Christians, other times not. Perhaps a wide variety of people will read it, but perhaps also this lack of focus will prove a problem.

"Conversion" is not at all well analyzed. At a key point (pg. 151) following Jesus without

"changing religion" is mentioned, and the author questions (without an answer) whether this is conversion. Surely a book so centrally about conversion should answer or at least analyze this point. The book leaves an impression that change of religion to Christianity is liberative; that is surely not the author's position but he ignores case studies that would show how change of religion is not necessarily liberative, and he never comments on this point.

The greatest weakness of the book lies in its place at the margins of Indian society. The book is thoroughly foreign in its approach to Indian issues, despite its manifest empathy for India. The Christianity that is commended likewise seems to be a marginalized and foreign faith, despite efforts by the author to distance himself from the overtly Westernized Christianity that continues in India today.

The author outlines a pleasing vision for what India might become (pg. 163ff), a vision not unlike what Rabindranath Tagore and many others have expressed. Does he see mainstream India arriving there by "converting" to marginalism? Is Christianity in India itself too mainstream and in need of conversion to the margin? What response is really desired from the mainstream Hindu who might read this book? These and other questions remain, yet the narratives shared in this book are stimulating and helpful and deserve a wide reading.