

The Road To Nowhere

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*"Well, we know where we're going, but we don't know where we've been"
("Road To Nowhere", Talking Heads, 1987)*

This paper is about the future of the mission agency. To understand this future, it will be helpful to know where we have come from. If we can better understand the origins of the mission agency, we might get some insight into why we face some of the tensions we do today, and identify some pointers to help us in the future.

The future of the mission agency

Mission agencies are facing a number of changes. Many of these are not unique to mission agencies. All organizations are products of their time, and for mission agencies this includes their organizational cultures and ways of working, since

"mission structures necessarily entail the application of human institutional forms. Structures devised for mission will thus always be susceptible to the same faults and distortions that beset their secular counterparts" (Stanley Skreslet, Union Theological Seminary)

To understand this more clearly, we will look at the origins of the modern mission agency, the assumptions and models upon which it is based, and the social and cultural changes that are affecting the viability of these models for the future. This will provide us with ideas and a road map for helping mission agencies to change and thrive in the twenty-first century.

Where did mission agencies come from?

When the founders of the Baptist Missionary Society, the London Missionary Society and the Church Missionary Society were making their initial plans in the late eighteenth century, they were not working in a vacuum. William Carey's famous tract gave away its intention by its title – 'An Enquiry into the Obligation of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens'. Those 'means' already existed in the wider society of the time, in the form of the voluntary association or society.

The voluntary society

The voluntary society began as a peculiarly Protestant form of social organization. The spirit of enterprise and initiative fostered by the Enlightenment, combined with the Reformation principle of the right to private interpretation of the Bible, led to the idea that individuals could also band together in common cause and interest. Many of the earliest voluntary associations remained part of the Church of England and had close links to the existing ecclesiastical structures (The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel and Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge are two such examples). John Wesley had made use of these concepts in the development of the movement (also initially within the Church of England) that became known as Methodism.

By the early nineteenth century the idea had expanded beyond these limits and was put to wider use. Voluntary associations were established for the purposes of missionary enterprise, Bible production and distribution, banning slavery, prison reform, temperance and myriad other purposes. In 1830 French aristocrat Alexis de Tocqueville visited America and was deeply impressed by the American propensity for voluntary associations:

Americans of all ages, all stations in life, and all types of disposition, are forever forming associations. There are not only commercial and industrial associations in which all take part, but others of a thousand different types – religious, moral, serious, futile, very general and very limited, immensely large and very minute. Nothing, in my view, deserves more attention than the intellectual and moral associations of America. (Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*)

The relative social and political egalitarianism of the emerging democracies of Europe and North America allowed for wide ownership of and commitment to such societies.ⁱ Networks of auxiliary associations raised funds and sent them to a central office, receiving back information for prayer and action. Involvement was open to all social classes:

What we see in Missionary, Bible, Tract and other kindred societies, not restricted to ecclesiastics, nor to any one profession, but combining all classes, embracing the masses of the people; and all free, open, and responsible ... *It is the contributors of the funds who are the real association, the individuals, churches, congregations, who freely act together through such agencies for an object of common interest.* (Rufus Anderson, American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, writing in 1837).

What is interesting about this quotation is the wide degree of democratic involvement that the early voluntary societies engendered. The use of the principle of voluntary association by many missionary societies is well recognized.ⁱⁱ It provided a model upon which to structure their work and has proved to be remarkably effective and flexible over 200 years of mission history. Evangelicalism, with its individualistic spirituality, its distrust of official church structures and its methods of group discipleship, has found it easy to use such structures and systems. As the first missionary societies were absorbed into their denominations of origin by the middle of the nineteenth century, a new generation of mission agencies based on the voluntary principle came into being to work in the 'inland' areas hitherto neglected by the older societies. The principle was invoked again in the formation of a new wave of evangelical mission agencies in the decades immediately after the Second World War.

But perhaps what is less well acknowledged is that patterns of social affiliation are changing at this point in time, with significant implications for mission agencies.

Bowling Alone

In 1995 an article entitled 'Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital', by Harvard professor Robert Putnam, was published in the *Journal of Democracy*. The inevitable book followed later. Putnam's thesis was that the networks of social and civic engagement (or 'voluntary societies') described by Tocqueville were in decline. America's 'social capital', a term which refers to "features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit", is being reduced. He quotes a staggering array of statistics showing that across all types of social association, such as religious affiliation (church attendance), union membership, participation in parent-teacher associations and the number of volunteers for civic organizations such as the Boys Scouts and the Red Cross, involvement has declined in the last fifty years. The title of his article came from his discovery that, while more Americans go tenpin bowling than ever, participation in organized bowling leagues fell 40 per cent between 1980 and 1993.

This is not a trend that affects America alone. A decline in the level of social engagement in Europe is also evident, argues Putnam, even if it is not as clear and unambiguous as in the USA, and the UK Government Performance and Innovation Unit says that levels of social capital are far lower in Britain than in most of the rest of Europe.ⁱⁱⁱ

Before we decry the rampant individualism and the breakdown of society reflected in these figures, we should note that other forms of civic and social association have emerged to replace these older structures. Mass-membership organizations such as the National Trust,

Greenpeace and the giant American Association of Retired Persons^{iv} have grown rapidly since the 1970s. Similarly, gym membership is now one of the most common forms of social affiliation for younger generations, and we should note the importance assigned to small groups and networks of friends and associates made through work.

40 per cent of all Americans claim to be 'currently involved in a small group that meets regularly and provides support or caring for those who participate in it'. This includes Bible study groups and prayer fellowships, Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, book discussion groups and hobby clubs. These small groups often move beyond their initial purpose into wider community involvement, as well as acting as a substitute for other relationship ties that have been weakened in a fragmented society (divorced and single people are two to four times more likely to be involved in small groups).

But we can also note that these newer forms of social affiliation are different to the earlier voluntary societies.

Small groups can often be fluid in membership, and the networking propensities of younger generations rarely, if ever, cut across social boundaries.

Mass-membership organizations are based on a general commitment to a common symbol or ideal, or to common benefits, and not generally on commitment to work together with other people. Little in the way of action is expected by such an organization's members, except perhaps the payment of annual dues and the receipt of a newsletter:

"Only 5 to 10 percent of AARP members participate in local affiliates, and new members join after getting a letter in the mail, not an invitation to a local club meeting. The AARP is not like the locally rooted federations that once dominated the ranks of nationwide US voluntary associations" (Robert Putnam)

This does not mean that such organizations are unable to have an impact. Many development organisations, Christian or not, have developed donor bases using such methods. But such organisations are often seen as acting 'on behalf of' their members, rather than being a conduit through which their members' concerns and energies can be channelled. Such 'members' might be better understood as 'consumers' of a cause, and are best likened to fans rather than players.

Symbolic affiliation of this nature translates into low levels of loyalty, which is inevitable when individual participation is reduced to the level of simply writing an occasional cheque. Direct mail becomes a key method of membership and income growth for such organizations. Dropout rates after the first year average around 30 per cent. Involvement levels are volatile and unpredictable. For example, Greenpeace grew in membership from 800,000 to 2.35 million between 1985–1990 and then fell by 85 per cent to around 350,000 by 1998.

Voluntary associations began their existence as a way that individuals and groups committed to a common cause could act together and have ended up as organizations that do so on behalf of them.

What are the implications of these trends for mission agencies? If we accept that the mission agency owes something of its origin to the emergence of the 'voluntary society' then it is inevitable that changes in the nature of social affiliation will have an impact upon any organization based on such models. Because the voluntary society had a vital feature:

'it depended on its very existence on regular participation; it developed means of gaining that participation at *local* level ... a network of locally organised auxiliary associations.' (Andrew Walls)

The wide sense of ownership and involvement inculcated by the successful voluntary society is being replaced on the one hand by a much looser sense of affiliation to and ownership of large causes and on the other hand by closer relationships and loyalties to one's immediate group of friends and contacts.

The tendency of voluntary organizations to 'professionalize' and act 'on behalf of' their members, rather than through them, becomes even more evident when we look at the specific type of voluntary society that was consciously adopted by the early mission agencies: that is, the joint-stock trading company.

The joint-stock trading company

When a trading company has obtained its charter, they usually go to its utmost limits; and their stocks, their ships, their officers and men are so chosen and regulated as to be likely to answer their purpose; but they do not stop there, for encouraged by the prospect of success they use every effort, cast their bread upon the waters, cultivate friendship with everyone from whose information they expect the least advantage.

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 expenses, etc, etc.

From such a society a committee might be appointed, whose business it should be to procure all the information they could upon the subject, to receive contributions, to enquire into the characters, tempers, abilities and religious views of the missionaries, and also to provide them with necessaries for their undertakings.^v

The voluntary society may have become common by the 1830s, but as little as forty years earlier, when William Carey wrote the above words, it was still very much in its infancy. Such associations could in fact be viewed with extreme suspicion given the nature of the times. English Dissenters like Carey were sometimes thought to have revolutionary aims hidden under the cloak of 'religious and civil liberty', and foreign missions were opposed in some quarters, such as in the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, because of such associations. And so Carey took his specific analogy from the world of business – organizing a missionary society is something like floating a company – thus providing a safer model that would be acceptable to a wider body of opinion.

It is doubtful that Carey intended the metaphor of the joint-stock company to be taken literally or pressed to the full extent of its meaning. He intended that his work should be led and managed from India. But the later move of the Baptist Missionary Society from Kettering to London and the emergence of new leadership that wanted to institute full business procedures and full control of field operations sowed the seeds of the ultimate split between Carey and the organization that he was instrumental in founding.

And the business analogy, while fortuitous, also had an unforeseen formative role in shaping the organizational future of the mission agency. It was largely positive, taking advantage of powerful social currents flowing at the time. The Industrial Revolution in Britain provided for increased social mobility, with new paths of opportunity opening up for achievement, status and recognition. Carey was able to achieve far more than he would have been able to had he remained a humble cobbler and Baptist pastor in the East Midlands.

But models do not only shape our thinking and practice. They also limit them and produce unforeseen consequences. No model or idea is value free and neutral. They carry within themselves certain values and ideals that influence us in unexpected ways. For example, while the 'voluntary society' model opened up opportunities for involvement in mission to a wide array of people, the business model ironically served simultaneously to constrain and

limit that involvement. The 'committee' proposed by Carey all too easily became the expert in the task, a professional elite whose very existence (often unintentionally) marginalized and restricted mission involvement to the few. At first, the joint-stock company provided a useful way to breaking ecclesiastical constraints on action, and yet ultimately it created a new controlling clique.

Subsequent developments in corporate ideas and practice during the nineteenth and twentieth century had a profound impact on the operations of the mission society. The modern corporation came into being by the first part of the twentieth century, with its focus on the rationalisation of production, and the application of 'scientific' principles to all aspects of management. This influenced developments in the missionary society. During the nineteenth century, women's missionary societies such as the Women's Union Missionary Society (founded 1861) became a major feature, and by 1900 there were 41 women's missionary organisations in America alone, which supported over 1200 single women missionaries, and had an income of over US\$2million per annum. They were so successful that they became attractive targets for 'takeover' or 'merger' by other, male-led missionary societies. The arguments for this were usually based on principles of efficiency in administration and leadership. It is worth commenting that rarely did women remain in leadership in the newly-merged organisations, and "the takeover process was complete before the mid-twentieth century". The professionalisation of mission reinforced by trends in organisational development that dragged the mission agency along, whether it wanted to or not.

The missionary transnational corporation (or 'international mission agency', as it is usually known) stands astride the world missionary movement like a benevolent colossus, often entering new markets (or 'fields', as they are sometimes called) via the takeover of smaller national or regionally focused initiatives and mission agencies. They are now so influential that the World Evangelical Alliance Missions Commission, until recently a network of national evangelical missionary alliances, is being pressured to find a way for them to relate directly into its network, rather than through their national representatives. The 'real' transnational corporations, who comprise 50 out of the top 100 economies of the world and whose interests are now often served and promoted by national governments rather than vice versa, find their Christian doppelgangers in these organizations. This has the outcome of further 'distancing' mission from *hoi polloi*, reinforcing the power of a professionalized elite of experts.

Such professionalizing trends are a recurring theme throughout the history of the modern Protestant missionary movement, as are democratizing reactions that serve to open up mission involvement from the few to the many.

Mission agencies in the new world (dis)order

Having identified the organizational models upon which the contemporary mission agency is based, and the social changes that are affecting these models, maybe it is time for the mission agency to adopt a new model.

"Validity in a purely theological sense is never the only issue. To be truly suitable, mission structures must also be culturally appropriate and right for their age" (Stanley Skreslet).

The professionalizing trends to which I have referred serve to limit and restrict involvement in world mission. Attempts at standardization and normalization tend to have the same outcome.

"It is assumed that standardisation will make doing business simpler, more predictable, and more easily communicated, especially to newcomers. (But) the mission that persists in blindly perpetuating habituated practices is doomed to a decline because of nonresponsiveness to nuance and change" (Ted Ward, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School)

So, how can we build future-oriented structures that will serve world mission in the twenty-first century, mission that will be messy, chaotic and pluriform, yet also involve many focused, concrete and specialized stakeholders? How can we allow for diverse visions and means, facilitating mission involvement that is non-hierarchical, non-bureaucratic, personalized, immediate and local?

'Let's do Lunch' : The network as the organization of the future

The network structure has underpinned a number of successful organizations recently. The International Campaign to Ban Landmines, which along with its co-ordinator Jody Williams was awarded the 1997 Nobel Peace Prize, and the Jubilee 2000 Coalition, which persuaded several governments to write off debts owed by Third World countries, are two such examples. Al-Qaeda is another. All three of these organizations have benefited from a network structure that allows passionate and committed individuals and groups to contribute to a wider purpose (whether for good or ill) with a minimum of co-ordination and administration. Widely seen as an effective antidote to bureaucracy (the corporate equivalent of arthritis), the network has arrived as the organizational structure for a globalizing postmodern world.

So perhaps we need to restructure our organisations to function more like networks in themselves. But what is so special about a network? Why should it be so appropriate for a complex and diverse time such as ours?

Networks are OK with diversity

The first great strength of networks is that they can cope with variety and complexity. Instead of requiring standard operating principles across an entire organization for the sake of consistency, networks are by nature diverse. In a postmodern context that is suspicious of all attempts to define a norm, this is both welcome and appropriate. Networks contain a variety of organizational forms: they don't do away with them, they just change the context they exist in.

The global anti-capitalist movement is a good example of the kind of network that embraces an array of participating groups and organizations, many of which might in other contexts be opposed to one another. During the protests at the World Trade Organization meetings in Seattle in 1999, environmental groups both small and large (like Greenpeace) combined with anti-capitalist anarchists and blue-collar American unions to effectively hijack the agenda of those meetings. The variety of organizations involved, diverse in size, focus and agenda, did not prevent their effective co-operation towards a mutual goal.

A network structure will allow mission agencies to involve diverse individuals and churches more easily. It expands ownership and involvement, and it de-professionalises mission, giving it back to the whole church.

Networks are about connections

Networks can embrace a wide variety of stakeholders, and so they develop a second great strength. Because there is less need to focus attention on making sure that each member or 'node' of the network fits into a coherent predetermined pattern, more time and energy can be spent on the links between these nodes. What matters are the connections; what is connected is much less critical. The key to an effective network is the communication between its various parts, and interaction between groups that are different from each other is a prerequisite for the kind of knowledge creation that is required to thrive in an ever-changing and complex environment.

Paul Revere's midnight dash around the towns and villages of eighteenth-century Massachusetts and his cry 'The British are coming!' is as well known to every American as

Churchill's 'We will fight them on the beaches' is to every Briton.^{vi} Having been alerted to plans by the British to march on the provincial towns of Lexington and Concord, in order to arrest the colonial leaders John Hancock and Samuel Adams and to seize the guns and ammunition stored by the colonial militia in those places, Revere rode through the night to forewarn the local communities. Within five hours, word had reached Andover, forty miles to the west of Boston. By the following day, the colonial militia had assembled at Concord and defeated the British army in a skirmish that marked the start of the American Revolution. What is less well known about these events is that Revere's friend William Dawes undertook a similar ride at the same time, heading in a different direction, and yet few men from the towns he rode through fought at Concord. In *The Tipping Point* Malcolm Gladwell suggests there was a good reason why Revere succeeded where Dawes failed. Revere was what Gladwell calls a 'connector'. He was gregarious, sociable and active in local politics in Boston. He acted as a link between the various 'committees of correspondence' that sprung up in colonial New England in protest to the 1773 Tea Act (which led directly to the now-famous Boston Tea Party). During his night-time ride, Revere knew whose doors to knock on. Dawes didn't. The linkages and connections made the difference.

Time and again the value of thinking in terms of linkages and connections can be demonstrated (in knowledge creation, in systems thinking, even in the valuing of dot.com businesses). And a network is the best organizational form to ensure that such links are strong and effective.

Networks are adaptable

As well as being able to include an assortment of stakeholders and provide the means for them to link with one another, networks have another advantage in a world of unpredictable change – they are flexible and adaptable. Taken as a whole, and especially if it contains a wide variety of different types of member, a network can adapt to almost any sort of change. It can be likened to a flotilla rather than a supertanker). If it is heading towards rocks in a storm, the supertanker is too cumbersome to turn and avoid the oncoming disaster. Some of the flotilla might also be lost in the same situation, but most will survive. The persistence of the Al-Qaeda network in the face of unrelenting pressure is a case in point.

“[It] is a blueprint of how Bin Laden currently operates, using a loosely tied network of local militant groups that operate with his blessing and support, but which cannot be easily traced directly back to him. It is also this loose structure that makes it so difficult for intelligence and police agencies to disrupt the network.

A former Egyptian militant described the structure of radical Islamic groups as having been modelled after 'a bunch of grapes'. 'Each group operates independently with its members not knowing who the other groups are. That way, if one member of the group is plucked off by police, the other groups remain unaffected,' he said.” (Richard Engel, Inside Al-Qaeda)

On this occasion, we would wish that the organization concerned had not learned to make use of the advantages that a network structure confers. But it serves to illustrate the lesson none the less.

The Internet provides another good example of the flexibility of a network. It was originally created to ensure that US government and military communications could continue in the event of a nuclear attack. Messages are broken down into 'packets' and distributed along the communications links that exist and then reconstituted into a single message at the receiver's end. The efficacy of this system was demonstrated on 11 September 2001 in the aftermath of the terrorist outrages at the World Trade Center in New York. Telephone systems were unable to work (mainly because many of the lines and mobile telephony antennas had been destroyed along with the Twin Towers). But e-mail continued to work, as the communications systems simply worked around the parts of the network that no longer functioned.

So there are three main reasons why networks function so well in a globalizing postmodern world. They can include great variety, they allow a focus on linkages (with all that means for knowledge creation) and they are flexible, able to cope with uncertain and changing conditions. These are all vital features in a mission context of diverse stakeholders and continual change.

The challenges to networks

We noted earlier the observation that, since missions structures are based on the appropriation of organizational forms existing in wider use, they are subject to the same weaknesses that beset their secular counterparts. I'm not claiming that networks are a panacea, but that they are probably the best structural type for our present time.

One weakness of networks is that they are not good at charting a single course. Returning to our earlier nautical analogy, networks are not like single supertankers, nor are they like a military fleet. They are like a flotilla that has agreed to go to a certain place, but not necessarily in the same type of boat, or by going the same route. Networks can include many competing interests, even among those committed to a common cause. One executive of the Swiss/Swedish engineering giant ABB, which has a federal/network structure, commented that 'sometimes all you can do is watch the herd, and observe with relief that, in general, they seem to be heading in the right direction'. I was very aware during my time at Global Connections that we had very little power to change what its member organizations did, though we did have a degree of influence which often surprised me and which called for careful judgement.

Travelling on the Road to Nowhere

Unlike the Talking Heads, we now have some idea of where we have been. Without this, we're in danger of going round in circles. But maybe now we also have some idea of where missionary involvement from the UK is going – a future that is messy, chaotic, democratic and from the grassroots. By adopting a network structure, mission agencies can help to serve this future, rather than restricting it to a professional clique of experts.

Endnotes

ⁱ As well as the eighteenth-century British examples mentioned earlier, some other early missionary societies included the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (1810), the Basle Mission (1815) and the Berlin Society (1824).

ⁱⁱ See, for example, Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, pp. 327–34; Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions* (London: Penguin, 1986²), p. 214; Shenk, *Changing Frontiers of Mission*, pp. 178–9; Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, pp. 241–54.

ⁱⁱⁱ "The Performance and Innovation Unit's report on social capital showed the damage fear does. In Britain, people's trust in one another is far lower than in most of Europe. While the most successful countries - Norway, Switzerland and others - score 65% in trusting other people, Britain lags near the bottom at only 31%" (Polly Toynbee, 'A Whole Nation of Meldreys: I Just Can't Believe It', *The Guardian*, 28 August 2002. Available from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0,3604,781684,00.html>)

^{iv} Membership of 35 million in 1996.

^v William Carey, 'An Enquiry into the Obligation of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens' (1792)

^{vi} The fact that we know less about Revere in the UK is probably because most of us tend to focus on the wars that we won!