



# Missionary Training: Not if, but when and how

By Art Beals

Earlier this year I was asked to serve on a panel discussion at an ACMC conference in California. Four of us were divided into two teams to debate whether missionaries should receive more or less training before going to the field. I “argued” for less training. Our debate turned out to be quite good-natured and even humorous. The hour was insightful and enjoyed by all. Still, I can’t help but wonder if some left scratching their heads and wondering if I really meant what I said. After all, who can argue against pre-field missionary training? Logic would tell us that the more training missionaries can get before heading to the field, the better. Yet missions history doesn’t necessarily prove this point!

I’m all in favor of well-trained missionaries. What concerns me is that often pre-field training for missionaries is often academically-oriented theory, biased by some inappropriate American values, and given to novices who do not understand the setting into which they’re headed. Idealistic missionaries then head for the field certain that they are ready to start working their ministry plans.

Several ministry examples around the world evidence the fact that many of our traditional American pre-field training models are well-intentioned but inadequate. At the fairly recent event of the 200th anniversary of Christianity in Bangladesh (a Muslim country smaller than Oregon, but with a population of 134 million people), it was lauded that a million Bangladeshis now identify themselves as “Christian”. Mission leaders from a very experienced, large mission agency were asked to analyze the state of the Bangladeshi Church. In its multi-page report, it was revealed that out of one million Bangladeshi Christians, 950,000 of these Christians were not Muslim Background Believers. Rather, they were from families of one or more generations of Christians or were converts from animistic hill tribes. Thus, what was being done in missions in that country 100 years ago converted

more Muslims than what has been done there in recent years. In the Philippines, where my wife and I served for ten years, missionaries often speak of new conversions among Filipino people when much of what is being accomplished is revitalizing the mission work that was done there centuries ago. How does this reality reflect upon our training models to prepare candidates best for the challenge of reaching the large Muslim population—a population still relatively unreached with the Gospel?

I do believe that we need pre-field missionary training, but training that is significantly different from what is often offered by programs that stress strategy over enculturation and relationship building. Such training should include:

### **1. Requiring local experience first**

While serving as missions pastor at University Presbyterian Church in Seattle, I spent much time interacting with people who aspired to long-term missionary service. If someone declared that he wanted to go serve in China, perhaps as a teacher of English, my invariable first question was, “How have you ministered among Chinese people in Seattle?” Whenever possible we required that potential missionaries minister locally among the type of people they wished to eventually serve, for at least six months. In this way they both prove their commitment to their chosen people group, and they are much more prepared to effectively relate to these people when they arrive on the field.

In earlier years this requirement would not have been as easily fulfilled as it is today in the United States. America is a multi-cultural nation. Our cities and small towns are filled with immigrants from every corner of our world. Why, then would we not insist on observing future missionaries minister to these people groups while they are still here and able to be supported by their regular lifestyles?

### **2. Unlearning American biases**

Subtly and almost unknowingly, many American missionaries head to the field with a mindset of cultural superiority. We are often imbued, through both our secular and religious culture, with a sense of triumphalism: “We have come to do the job!” We are eager for results that can be reported back home. Many Christians are captured by a “closure theology” that drives us to finish the job quickly. The missionary, then, becomes a teacher before learning; a speaker before learning the observational skills of listening. We become too quickly the “center” for ministry activity rather than the empowerer of those we have come to serve. Much of missionary training, to be effective, must be as diligent in helping the “learner” to unlearn what has been the norm of his Western culture. Learning to listen, facilitating others to “tell their story” and then learning from the experiences of others the practical ways to apply what we have learned in our own Christian experience is basic to ministry. In fact, I’d go so far as to say that possibly half of all missionary training should be focused on unlearning rather than learning.

An excellent example of this problem occurred when the former Soviet Union “went out of business” following the collapse of communism. The Iron Curtain was pulled back and through a number of major initiatives, American mission agencies flooded the country, sometimes even at the invitation of the new government. Unfortunately few if any incoming missionaries sought to gain any insight from or partner with the Russian Orthodox Church, which in 1988 celebrated its 1,000th year of Christianity in Russia. The Russian Orthodox Church was actively engaged in mission in Alaska and other regions before the United States became a nation! While the Russian Church did have significant doctrinal differences from many Protestant/Evangelical churches, they had survived for more than seventy



years under the repressive Godless communist regime. We had much to learn from those who had suffered so much by holding on to “the faith once delivered to the saints!” But many groups were too involved in implementing their strategies to “missionize” the country that they overlooked this most important step. Much good was done for the gospel, but many of these initiatives eventually fell by the wayside, and a great deal of hostility toward Western Christian groups has developed. Perhaps the Russian Church would be far stronger today and Russia far less impacted by objectionable western values, had American missionaries entered as learners rather than teachers, as listeners rather than speakers!

### 3. Experiencing the culture before entering training

I would strongly urge churches and mission agencies to require that future long-term missionaries spend 1-2 years in an observable internship overseas before releasing them into full-time service. Ideally this internship would occur in the country or region where missionaries are to serve. The International Mission Board (the overseas arm of the Southern Baptist denomination) currently requires the successful completion of a three-year internship before officially committing a missionary to a field and team.

Such an internship would be one not of ministry or language learning per se, but of simply interacting with seasoned missionaries and committed national believers in that field. While there they gather invaluable exposure: a realistic grid through which they will pass their future formal training. I’m convinced that the dollars we spend on this sort of travel are some of the cheapest and most effective dollars we can spend for missionary training.

#### Between internship and the first term on the field

This is the point at which I would insert the majority of what has been traditional

missionary pre-field training. Personally, I wouldn’t allow anyone to enter formal missions courses without a significant short-term experience and debriefing. Training at this phase should include the following, in my estimation, in no particular order:

- **Community.** Two things in life require community: marriage and being a Christian! You can successfully accomplish neither alone. Missionaries must be a part of an accountability community on the field. Our pre-field training should be done within the context of both teaching and experiencing community. Too many “lone-rangers” are driven by their fierce Western individualism in missions today.

- **Cultural understanding and adaptation.** Missionaries need a road map for discerning the culture they are entering, and for adapting to that culture.

- **Empowerment of people.** Missionary preparation traditionally places great emphasis on teaching leadership skills. Many of our training programs are weak in helping develop skills for leaders to become empowerers of others! In my ministry at University Presbyterian Church, I came to the congregation as a leader who knew how to get people to sign up for my ministries. This incredible group of saints taught me how to become an empowerer. I learned not to sell people on my ideas, but to empower their vision. People commit themselves most to those things they are a part of creating!

- **Church planting,** but not in the way that we traditionally mean that term. So much baggage comes with that word, especially in the Muslim world. We’ve encouraged church planters to believe that they are not successful until they have planted a traditional church—an institution with policy, a form of government, and a formalized theology. In reality, healthy churches evolve much more informally, out of relationship, from the grass roots upward. Healthy churches need to develop their own forms of polity, worship styles and methods rather than

learning how to master ours!

#### After the first full term on the field

Once missionaries have completed their first full term, they still need ongoing training. I can think of at least three areas:

- **An intelligent debriefing of their experience** conducted by more seasoned missionaries, whether informally or formally (through a school’s faculty). The missionaries/students should give direction to the debriefing by asking questions and explaining their experience.

- **Briefing on changes that have taken place in western culture since their departure.** These would include sociological, financial, political and missiological issues.

- **Training in specialized skills** that missionaries have come to realize they need based on their situation. For example, one missionary to Turkey whom I know has moved from one Turkish city full of foreigners, to a distant area with no tourism and no foreigners. All of a sudden all of his neighbors are curious about why he isn’t “working.” Is he rich? Lazy? This missionary needs training in business development.

Looking back to our “debate” in California, I’m effectually in favor of more pre-field training. I would say that work on the “field” begins later after more and different training that often isn’t required now. I would place what many currently call “pre-field” training at a later point. May God give your church the courage and creativity to give your missionaries all of the training they need.

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