



By George Schultz

The importance of effective pre-field missionary training is sometimes minimized by our North American sense of urgency and efficiency. But at what cost? Consider the true story of one missionary who received woefully inadequate training before heading to the field:

“Answering the call of God, I was excited to leave my home and begin a life of service on an experienced team in Africa with an historic, well-known mission agency. What I wasn’t ready for was failure. I was asked to be part of an experiment in which I entered with no language training. The hope was for me to jump right into the heart language (as opposed to the trade language) of an unreached people. Yet everyone else on the team had previously learned the trade language and later learned the heart language, a language that is still unwritten.

This was only my first challenge. Our

team was multi-national which created quite different expectations of how I should adjust and what I would do if the “experiment” failed. The frustration and heartbreak that I went through caused me to go home shattered, believing I was worthless.

After receiving counsel (from another organization) I went to CIT to learn what was “assumed” by my first mission agency. I learned how to study a language, work on a team, communicate cross-culturally, prepare for the field, adapt to a new culture, read the signs of culture shock and most of all, how to be a whole person on the field.

I have since returned to the field and have found much success as a team member and as a witness to those I came to serve. If I could speak one truth into the lives of those preparing to serve overseas, it would be this: please seek pre-field training. It will save you much unnecessary heartache and frustration.

The decision is yours; are you willing to humble yourself and seek guidance for a long life of ministry or will you suffer from a quick departure to the field?”

In my 25 years of experience in missions I have frequently asked both church and mission agency leaders how much pre-field training they believe is foundational before a missionary enters long-term service. Their answers range from a week of orientation, to a seminary degree. Clearly, there is no consensus on either the amount of time, or the type of training that first-term missionaries need. Meanwhile, I have seen missionaries thrive for years and have seen others “crash and burn” within six months after their departure.

The latest research regarding missionary attrition and retention identifies some important factors to consider. Consider the following:

- The attrition rate among North American missionaries is 5.1% per year,



# Pre-Field Training: Your Missionary's Future May Depend On It

or one of every twenty missionaries.<sup>1</sup>

- The typical mission agency will lose 43% of its people over a 10-year period.<sup>2</sup>

- Almost three-fourths of the reasons given for missionary loss could be addressed and corrected by more adequate and appropriate pre-field training.<sup>3</sup>

- Agencies with the lowest attrition rates had 50% more training requirements than those with higher attrition rates.<sup>4</sup>

While I am not an advocate of dumping a truckload of information on future missionaries for the sake of information, I am convinced of the necessity of missionaries receiving the right training at the right time. I realize that missionaries can forget mere information before they arrive on the field, and can draw conclusions regarding their field, people group, and ministry that are not fully accurate without a working knowledge of the actual context.

But studies clearly indicate that at least

a certain amount of pre-field training is critical to missionary adjustment and success on the field. Training cannot wait until a missionary is fielded. At a minimum, I would suggest that outgoing missionaries need to be grounded in the following areas.

## 1. **Spiritual Formation**

A seasoned mission agency administrator says, “Twenty years ago, one out of every ten missionaries who came to our candidate school was poorly prepared theologically. Today that situation has completely reversed. Now only one out of every ten missionaries at our candidate school is adequately prepared theologically.”

Many churches today have a fuzzy idea at best of how to equip people for spiritual formation, let alone equip them to be equippers of others. Is it any wonder, then, that those whom they approve to agency as missionaries lack a plan for

maintaining a vital walk with God, and are ill equipped to disciple others?

Before missionaries leave for the field, they need to be grounded not only in doctrine but also in how to live out of the truths of the gospel in their personal lives. In addition, they need to know how to spiritually feed themselves from the Bible without the many Christian supports (churches, pastors, seminars, retreats, Christian radio, bookstores, etc) available to them in this country.

## 2. **Cross-cultural adjustment**

According to research<sup>5</sup>, the current leading cause for missionary attrition is that of the challenges associated with cross-cultural life and transition. Moving cross-culturally is a challenge for any person, marriage and family. This cause is largely avoidable with appropriate pre-field training in areas such as:

- **Leaving familiar life behind**, which

includes many tumultuous emotions and good-byes. If not anticipated, the missionary may feel he is falling apart emotionally and wonder if this is really God's calling. Saying one's good-byes effectively can make all the difference.

- **Identifying realistic expectations.**

This can make the transition much smoother and reduce high levels of frustration.

- **Preparing the entire family for culture shock and stress.** Training can minimize the pain, as it enables them to clearly understand the normal raw emotional responses. Marriages will be severely tested in a cross-cultural setting. If one spouse does not adjust well (and often it is the wife), this can spell trouble for the family.

Training children for cross-cultural entry is often woefully neglected. "...[I]f we are serious about reducing [missionary] attrition, the children of missionary candidates cannot be ignored or treated as a side issue in the training process. Children need to be as aware as their parents of the pressures of cross-cultural living and need to know that the reactions they will experience are normal."<sup>6</sup>

This is why finding a missionary training program that includes in-depth training for children is pivotal to success overseas. A parent told us that until this week their child was resistant in going to the field. But now after one week in our Kids Intercultural Training program the child is willing and excited to go. Think of the implications for just that one family. What a difference this training can make!

### 3. **Team, interpersonal and conflict management skills**

While it would seem easier to get along with fellow Christians on the field than with non-Christians, interpersonal problems between missionaries have long proven to be the most consistent stumbling blocks and reasons for attrition.<sup>7</sup> These interpersonal issues can often be exacerbated by the transition, culture

shock, and family issues noted above. Enhancing missionary skills in these areas should not have to wait until they are fielded. In fact, the sooner they are addressed the better.

### 4. **Encountering and understanding a new culture**

These skills differ from those relating to personal cross-cultural entry, mentioned above. Here what we mean are the abilities to discern and understand cultural clues, and translate that understanding into relevant ministry. When my wife and I arrived on the field we were told that the mistakes missionaries make in the first six months can haunt them for many years. Some cross-cultural mistakes may never be undone.

A proper entry posture into the culture is critical. Many westerners enter the field with an ethnocentric worldview if not prepared carefully. We must learn how our culture has influenced and shaped us. We need to sort through what of our faith is universally Biblical and what has been more culturally influenced. While the missionary will never fully understand the host culture before immersing in it, pre-field training can point him in the right direction of cultural appreciation.

### 5. **Acquiring a new language**

Language is best learned in the host culture, but before leaving the missionary can learn a host of general skills that will greatly expedite the language acquisition process. A course in language acquisition helps the missionary identify her own learning style, learn the strengths and weaknesses of various learning methodologies and systems, and helps her become more self-directed and motivated in the language learning process. This kind of training gives much confidence and inspires hope in the face of the often-overwhelming task of learning a language.

Most local churches are not equipped to provide all of the pre-field training that

a career missionary needs. Unfortunately, this leads some churches to transfer the responsibility of most if not all of pre-field training to schools and mission agencies. The local church, the college or seminary, and the agency all have vital parts to play in the process of pre-field training. How, then, should the local church ensure that its missionaries are receiving all of the pre-field training that they need? Here are some ideas:

1. Be intentional. Don't assume that mission agencies, colleges and seminaries will give your missionary all the training he needs. Ask them what training they provide. Set standards for what pre-field training will be required for your future missionaries.

2. Contribute what you can. Provide as much of the training as you can effectively deliver. At the very least, the local church is the ideal place for all of its people to learn skills in spiritual formation and discipling others. Admit your limitations.

3. Dialogue and partner with others. Outsource to other trusted organizations what training you cannot provide well, and for what others are well equipped to do. Network in order to find what you consider to be the best training providers.

4. "Upgrade" your missionary. Encourage your missionaries on home assignment by giving them the time and money to take more training in specific ministry skill areas. Those who have been on the field already have a much better idea of what they need to be more effective.

<sup>1</sup> Taylor, William, ed., *Too Valuable to Lose: Exploring the Causes and Cures of Missionary Attrition*, p.13. William Carey Library, Pasadena, CA, 1997.

<sup>2</sup> Van Meter, Jim, "Distinctive Practices in High Retention Agencies", as printed in *Connections: The Journal of the WEA Missions Commission*, June 2004, p.26.

<sup>3</sup> Taylor, William, ed. *Too Valuable to Lose: Exploring the Causes and Cures of Missionary Attrition*, p. 217. William Carey Library, Pasadena, CA, 1997.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 225.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 220, 221.

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