Standards of Excellence in Missionary Training Centers*
by Robert W. Ferris

Within the past two decades, there has been a virtual explosion in the number of missionary training centers around the world. The important contributions and significant needs of these centers was the focus of the WEF Missions Commission’s first international consultation, which was held in Manila in 1989. Even prior to that consultation, a database was developed with a view to establishing an international network of missionary training centers. A newsletter also was established with the purpose of serving that network. The book Internationalising Missionary Training was published following the consultation in Manila, drawing together papers and case studies presented at the consultation, plus several other pieces of interest to missionary trainers.

The WEF Missions Commission has continued to include among its objectives service to missionary trainers and their training centers. In 1996, Bill Taylor, Executive Director of the Missions Commission, asked me to lead a task force charged with identifying qualities distinctive of effective missionary training centers and their training programs. Members of the task force included Seth Anyomi (director of a missionary training center in Ghana), Barbara Burns (missionary educator in Brazil), Met Castillo (president of a missionary training center in the Philippines), David Harley (missionary educator and principal of a training center in Singapore), Steve Hoke (missionary educator in the USA), Jonathan Lewis (Missions Commission staff and then-director of a missionary training center in Argentina), and David Tai-Woong Lee (director of a missionary training center in Korea). Very early in the work of the task force, we were joined by C. Barnabas (registrar of the Senate of the Indian Institute of Missiology).

Members of the task force have met during Missions Commission consultations in Langley, British Columbia, in 1997, and in Foz do Iguassu, Brasil, in 1999. Face-to-face conferencing at these events has been supplemented by extensive e-mail dialogue. As the work of the task force progressed, our conversations centered on three questions: (1) What are the characteristics of effective missionary trainers? (2) What are the characteristics of effective missionary training programs? (3) What qualities are characteristic of persons suitable for training in a missionary training center?

Characteristics of Effective Missionary Trainers

Perhaps the most critical decisions in the establishment and administration of an effective missionary training center relate to the selection of the training staff. No training institution can rise above the level of its staff. It is worth recalling,

furthermore, that the student, when he is fully trained, will be like his teacher (Luke 6:40). The qualities of trainers, therefore, should reflect the qualities desired in the training centers’ graduates.

Many institutions have erred gravely in this regard. Intending to provide the finest staff for their training programs, they have recruited teachers with high academic degrees, often fresh from their graduate or post-graduate studies. This is a reasonable choice, if the purpose of the institution is to develop bright theoreticians. If the purpose is to train effective practitioners, however, highly deegree recent graduates are a poor choice. The best qualified missionary trainers always have extensive cross-cultural experience. If the candidate has earned a higher degree, she or he should have spent a few years in cross-cultural ministry following schooling before beginning to teach. The most critical decisions in the establishment and administration of an effective missionary training center relate to the selection of the training staff.

The principle that the trainer should model the qualities desired in graduates dictates the next two characteristics of effective missionary trainers as well. To be qualified for and effective in cross-cultural ministry, graduates must have attained significant spiritual maturity and exhibit well-developed interpersonal skills. Missionary trainers, therefore, must be held to stringent standards in these areas. This would include the biblical qualities of a good reputation among unbelievers and healthy family life (cf. 1 Tim. 3:7; Tit. 1:6). Trainers who do not exhibit spiritual maturity or effective interpersonal skills will be unqualified to mentor trainees or (worse yet!) will offer negative models of ministry leadership.

Effective missionary trainers also bring demonstrated gifts for teaching and mentoring adults. Two factors are reflected in this qualification. First, the effective trainer will be gifted for teaching and will have developed this gift in previous teaching and mentoring roles. Second, the trainer will understand how adult learners process information and acquire new skills, and this understanding will be applied to selection of appropriate training methods.

Finally, missionary trainers should have developed competence in one or more aspects of the training center’s curriculum. Every member of the training center staff must be prepared to contribute to the training task. Trainers should be well qualified for their training roles. Duplication of specializations rarely can be justified. Development of a training staff, therefore, must be undertaken thoughtfully and prayerfully.

**Characteristics of Effective Missionary Training Programs**

The task force identified five characteristics which distinguish the programs of effective missionary training centers. First, effective missionary training centers
are consciously and intentionally oriented toward character and skills development for cross-cultural ministry. Effective missionary training centers are clear about their purpose and are focused on their task. While missionary trainers appreciate and support the crucial role of Bible schools and seminaries in equipping leadership for the church, they also understand that their calling is different. When appropriate biblical and theological education is not readily accessible to missionary trainees, the missionary training center will need to provide this vital foundation for effective missionary service. Even then, however, missionary trainers remain focused on preparation for the missionary task and are not confused about their calling.

Second, the effective missionary training center is a living community devoted to developing Christian graces and to refining interpersonal skills. Community life is central to the task of the training center. Whereas the life of a college is built around the library and the lecture hall, the community is vital to the life of the missionary training center. In the intense encounter of daily life, personal weaknesses are exposed, Christian graces are nurtured, and interpersonal skills are refined. This is best realized when missionary trainees and their training staff live together, work together, eat together, worship together, go on mission together, cross cultural barriers together, laugh together, weep together, and pray together. No other setting simulates the intensity of relationships the trainee will encounter on the missionary team or the stresses of cross-cultural ministry. Unless the needed graces and skills are well developed, an uncertain future awaits on the mission field.

Third, effective missionary training centers make strategic use of informal and nonformal training learning. The centrality of the community already has focused the critical role of informal learning in missionary training. In the midst of life and ministry, as the training staff model a life of devotion to Christ and passion for a world he died to save, trainees come to share this life. Evidence of personal and interpersonal weaknesses most often arises spontaneously in the course of daily life and ministry, affording opportunity for personal counsel and modeling.

Nonformal learning also is critical to the task of the missionary training center, however. Staff-led discussion of case studies from field ministry situations enables the trainee to imagine herself or himself in unfamiliar roles and to envision appropriate courses of action. Simulated or real ministry encounters also are vital to effective missionary training. The model of Jesus is familiar to the missionary trainer: Jesus ministering before and with the disciples, then sending them out two by two, calling them back for debriefing then sending them again. Effective missionary training centers employ informal or nonformal learning methods in at least 50% of their training.
Campus and community-based learning alone is not adequate, however, for missionary preparation. Effective missionary training centers also incorporate into their programs significant field experience. Twenty-five percent or more of training time is invested in sustained engagement in an actual ministry situation. Weekend ministries, as helpful as they may be, do not have the same training effect as a full-time internship or ministry assignment. Only in the midst of ministry can ministry qualities and skills be fully developed and tested. In some cases, training center staff may supervise and counsel those in field assignments. In other cases, field supervisors may be recruited and trained by the center staff, with reports from the trainee’s supervisor submitted to the staff. The field assignment is viewed as a critical aspect. In recognition of outstanding development of the trainee’s preparation for missionary service; it is not just a way to keep trainees busy while the staff attends to other things. Lessons learned in ministry or in subsequent debriefing are an important aspect of the missionary training center’s contribution to trainees.

Finally, effective missionary training centers have training curricula appropriate to their task. Graduates of the missionary training center must be familiar with the Bible’s story and message. They must understand biblical bases for missionary engagement. They must have learned their place in the expansion of the church and be prepared to apply the experience of previous generations to their own life and ministry contexts. They must be skilled in learning a new culture and in acquiring a new language. They also must be effective witnesses to the gospel and be able to gather believers into a reproducing church. This is a short list; other context-specific courses will be needed in every center. Nevertheless, whatever the missionary training center’s curriculum may include and however it may be organized, it will address these core disciplines.

Missionary training centers may offer courses which provide this instruction for trainees, or they may set admission requirements to assure that trainees arrive with some parts of this curriculum (e.g., familiarity with the Bible’s story and message) already in place. Two cautions must be sounded, however. First, since trainees learn from their teachers (as noted above), training center staff must be aware that studies taken in other contexts may not stimulate missiological reflection or effect the same life-change as similar studies taken with a missionary trainer. Second, we must not assume that courses transferred from a Bible college or seminary can significantly shorten the time required in the training center’s community life or in the trainee’s field assignment. Missionary formation takes time!

**Characteristics of Trainees**

Identifying characteristics of the persons to be trained is critical to the effective missionary training center. The right staff and the right program invested in the
wrong trainees cannot anticipate a positive outcome. At times, of course, we must be prepared for God to overrule our categories. Nevertheless, basic agreement about trainee qualifications will facilitate the task of missionary trainers, will avoid risk to trainees unfit for the rigors of cross-cultural ministry, and will minimize missionary casualties and injury to the cause of Christ. Three fundamental qualifications are commonly acknowledged.

First, trainee candidates should give credible evidence of a personal calling and commitment to cross-cultural ministry. Some missionary training centers admit only trainees who are under appointment to cross-cultural ministry by their church or by a mission-sending agency. Other training centers admit trainees who are not affiliated with a sending agency but who testify to a call to cross-cultural service. Students pursuing personal development or curiosity may disrupt the dynamic of a living community and hinder the development of others.

Second, trainee candidates should possess the physical health and emotional stability requisite for cross-cultural living. Life on the mission field often confronts missionaries with a range of cultural, linguistic, social, structural, technological, and medical challenges not encountered in their homeland. These challenges, encountered both personally and as families, when added to the pressures of ministry, generate considerable stress. If a candidate’s physical health or emotional stability is fragile, she or he probably should not be considered a candidate for missionary training.

Finally, candidates for missionary training should evidence levels of moral purity and spiritual maturity requisite for ministry leadership. If basic moral qualifications for ministry leadership have been compromised, there is little the missionary training center or the candidate can do to restore what has been lost. Other ministry opportunities will exist, even if not in front-line missions. Rather than simply rejecting the applicant, training center staff may be able to counsel the person or his/her church toward an area of potential service.

If a candidate lacks spiritual maturity, on the other hand, additional nurture in the home church, given time, may lead to a promising reapplication. The training center staff should communicate directly with the church’s leadership, however, indicating specific signs of immaturity and areas of needed spiritual growth. In some cases, the training center may recommend or provide resources for the church to use in this process.

Unlisted Factors

Although the focus of the task force has been on positive characteristics of their staff, and trainees, the list above is noteworthy as much for factors which are not included as for those which are. No mention is made of the physical setting
of the missionary training center, whether urban or rural, whether modern or primitive, whether in permanent facilities owned by the center or in rented quarters.

Although it is assumed that a training center must possess the resources needed to support its training program, technology support or library resources have not been specified. Nevertheless, effective training programs cannot be sustained without appropriate and adequate resources.

Similarly, program funding and administrative structures have not been specified. Biblical standards of appropriateness and integrity bind all Christians, but missionary trainers have met these standards in a variety of ways.

No mention has been made of the specific length of the missionary training program. This will vary with the scope of the program and the preparedness of candidate trainees. As noted above, however, formation for missionary life and ministry does take time. Intensive training programs should be approached with special caution, assuring that the relational and formational effects of good missionary training are well guarded.

The number of staff required to operate the missionary training center is not specified. The size and design of the training program will dictate an appropriate staff size. Schooling educators should be alert to lower student/teacher ratios required in informal and nonformal training, however, compared to those acceptable in formal education institutions.

The academic qualification of training staff also is unspecified. In some cases, advanced biblical and missiological credentials may be an appropriate concern, but never at the expense of those qualities identified above. Staff members shaped by the rigors of the academe and familiar with missiological disciplines and resources can be a great asset to the training program. Priority in staff selection always must be given to effective field experience and interpersonal skill, however, rather than to academic achievement.

Finally, it should be noted that no statement is made regarding the academic background of trainees. Some missionary training centers may design their training program for persons with specific levels of prior schooling, but that need not be the norm. Indeed, close linkage of the center’s program with schooling criteria, whether in this area or others, may subvert its most important training effects.

Great variety exists in the form and design of effective missionary training. The areas easiest to specify and verify are among those in which the greatest variety exists. Nevertheless, effective missionary training centers do have several
characteristics in common. Members of the task force recognize that some characteristics identified may not be immediately attainable in all contexts. By lifting up these characteristics, however, the task force hopes to encourage missionary trainers and to provide guidance for those desiring to strengthen missionary training.

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