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. This 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? (2) 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 center’s 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 degreed 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.

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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
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 train-

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ing 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 effective missionary training centers, 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.

“Intensive” training programs should be approached with special caution, assuring that the relational and formational effects of good missionary training are well guarded.

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.

Robert Ferris is Associate Dean for Doctoral Studies at Columbia International University. He headed up the WEF Missions Commission task force on accrediting missionary training programs.
On Spirited Horses, Missiology, And Beginnings
by Nancy Thomas

A little over a year ago, the Universidad Evangelica Boliviana invited my husband Hal and me to set up a graduate program in missiology. We responded to the tug of the Spirit and arrived in the tropical city of Santa Cruz, Bolivia in January, 1999. We spent the first seven months learning all we could about the Latin American missionary movement and about our future students and what they needed in order to participate fully in the movement. Our 18 years of missionary service among the Aymara people of Bolivia had given us a depth of experience, but not the breadth we felt we needed to accomplish this new task. So we came as learners, with some trepidation.

When we opened registration for our first term in September, we wondered how many students would actually commit to the program. As I write this, we’re about to wrap up the first two courses with 12 students, a good number for a beginning. I hope they’ve learned as much as we have! One of my favorite poems by Theodore Roethke repeats the refrain, “I learn by going where I have to go.” That’s certainly been our experience this first term.

What should a graduate program in mission for Latin Americans look like? In some ways it will be like other graduate programs anywhere in the world, with some of the same standards, expectations, and even agonies as students and teachers both claw their way toward truth. (Clawing toward truth is what it feels like right now. Another day might call forth a different metaphor.) But in other ways it will be unique, suited to the background, learning styles, and aspirations of these particular women and men. We are still in the difficult process of defining that uniqueness.

We’ve discovered that most of our students (all bright and highly motivated) are gifted in oral expression but struggle with reading critically, expressing themselves in writing, and reflecting in a creative way that integrates academic input with real life experience. Our classes have been noisy, highly participatory. Even though we meet for four hours straight on Friday night, no one goes to sleep. They even hang around after class to keep the discussion going. This is good. But they all struggle to keep up with the assigned reading, research, and reflective writing. So we as teachers struggle too, trying to figure out how to bring them from where they are to where they need to be. And figuring out where they need to be in the end cannot be our decision alone. We are a community of scholars and ministers, gathered around the topic of the missio Dei, God’s mission in the world, asking the Holy Spirit to prepare us all to cooperate with him in that mission.

Our challenge is to know where to set our standards and how to enable the students to meet them, without turning them into replicas of North American scholars. Most of them have come out of crowded school systems that stress memorizing and marching. We need wisdom in bringing together the elements of academic rigor, Latin American passion, the freedom to be creative, a deep and genuine spirituality, the celebratory nature these people bring to all of life, and experiences that for many of them include first-hand knowledge of poverty, oppression, and injustice.

Our first class, Introduction to Missiology, has proved provocative. We define missiology as the discipline that integrates biblical and theological studies, investigation in the social sciences (especially anthropology and history), spirituality, and practical ministry experience in order to understand God’s mission in the world and how best to be his colaborers. Ideally, it is an upward-moving spiral of reflection that leads to action that leads to more reflection that leads to wiser action and on and on. In this first class, we intro-
SPIRITED HORSES
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duced students to key Latin American missiologists, some of whom are quite critical of past North American missionary activity on the continent. We led discussions on some of the tensions in the contemporary Latin American missionary movement, tensions, for example, between the strictly evangelistic focus on unreached people groups and the focus on holistic mission that deals with issues of poverty and justice as part of conversion and discipleship. We tried to grapple with the awakening Catholic mission movement and the Pentecostal nature of Latin American Protestantism. And we encouraged students to apply it all to their current and future ministry in mission.

We have one more intensive course in November and then some needed time to evaluate, adapt, and continue planning. Many of our students will participate in this process. Next year we hope to offer a full schedule of classes as well as see our program proposal through the approval process the Bolivian government requires. We still don’t feel as if we know what we’re doing. Hal remarked several times during the term that the class felt to him like a corral of spirited horses, full of energy and fire, but on the edge of control. Of course, education is not about control, or even management. But it would be slightly more comfortable if there were a nice orderly progression in what we’re doing, if we understood our students and their needs better, and if we could only find the official Manual on Setting up a Graduate Program in Latin American Missiology. If any of you out there have a copy, please send it to us. Soon.

Nancy Thomas and her husband Hal have been missionaries among the Ayavaya peoples of Bolivia for 18 years. Nancy’s special vocation is in training majority world Christian writers. The Thomases are currently on special assignment to the Universidad Evangelica Boliviana, setting up a graduate program in missiology.

Anthony in Missions Training
by Wilma Davies

During the past 20 years, the study of anthropology has gradually been given a place in seminary curricula, alongside biblical and theological studies, especially for the training of missionaries. Many notable books and academic articles have been written to show the value of the anthropological approach in the preparation of missionaries. Given that these articles are readily available in English, my purpose here is to show from my own experience of teaching anthropology in Argentina its immediate value as part of an overall missions training programme.

The Usefulness of Anthropology

Grunlan and Mayers see four ways in which anthropology can contribute to missionary preparation:

1. It gives the missionary understanding of another culture.
2. It aids the missionary in entering another culture.
3. It facilitates the communicating of the gospel in another culture.
4. It aids in the process of implanting the church in another culture.

From my experience, I would put the second point in first place because the study of anthropology helps to prepare missionaries to enter another culture before they have even left their own, particularly in the formation of attitudes, which will be the main theme of this article.

“Anthropology has more to do with forming attitudes towards other peoples than learning details about them.” This was one of the first things that Dr. Blacking said to the latest intake of freshers, and 20 years later I still remember his statement and have found it to be true.

Here in Argentina the need to change attitudes is no less great than it was in Belfast 20 years ago, as an early encounter with new seminary students revealed. A fourth-year student, enthralled by a recent visit to Africa, came forward to teach a Swahili chorus to the newer students. At the first mention of Africa, the entire group burst into animal-type calls, hooted with their hands over their mouths, and jumped around making gestures with their fingers to indicate a bone through the nose. The student was understandably very upset, and I was enlightened.

It is not, however, only new seminary students who need to learn respect for other ethnic groups. Only recently I was shocked by the statement, “An African is an African is an African,” and that was from a missionary candidate wanting to go to Africa, who already had two years’ experience with a short-term missions organization but little theological or anthropological training.

Will such ethnocentric attitudes not hinder rather than help the spread of the gospel? If the answer to this question is yes, as I believe it must be, then we must make sure that our missions students and candidates receive adequate preparation in terms of sensitivity training and attitude formation. In this, anthropology is not the only tool, as the Scriptures themselves speak directly to this issue, but it is a very useful tool.

Attitude Formation

An introductory anthropology course deals with basic concepts such as “culture,” “society,” and “worldview.” Students should come to understand that we all look at the world through “culturally coloured spectacles.” Other peoples simply have a different set of coloured glasses. By trying to look at the world through another’s lenses, students should see that from this perspective the strange
behaviour of the other person actually makes sense. Such insights come almost as revelations. Who would have guessed that some of the most “simple” peoples on earth, such as the Australian Aborigines, live in a conceptual universe that is so complicated that it is incredibly difficult for us to begin to understand it? To raise respect for these supposedly “primitive” people, one has only to give students a chart on marriage rules and see how many hours it takes for them to figure out whom one is allowed to marry!

As Clyde Kluckhohn says, “Anthropology holds up a great mirror to man and lets him look at himself in his infinite variety.” Of course, what one normally sees first when one looks in a mirror is oneself. This is the beauty of anthropology: In the process of learning about the society and culture of others, we have no option but to learn about ourselves.

A Challenge to Ethnocentrism

The study of other cultures challenges our ethnocentric values and perceptions, but the concept has to be raised and examined openly. Ethnocentrism is the natural (and unconscious) tendency to regard other peoples as inferior to ourselves. An anthropological study of worldview, and especially of values, shows that we tend to evaluate others according to what we are good at. Westerners are good at technology and put a high value on efficiency and progress; therefore, we tend to depreciate those who have a “simple” or “primitive” technology, labelling them as “backward” and “ignorant.” Perhaps what we fail to see is that they value human relationships and harmony with their environment over technology, and they prefer to spend more time caring for each other than working with machines.

An introductory course in anthropology is valuable because it reveals these blind spots and should make students sensitive to the values that guide the behaviour of others. Anthropology, as a secular discipline, can make no judgement on which values are ultimately “better,” but as Christians we can use the Bible as our plumb line. When we bring “technology and progress” and “relationships and harmony” to the Bible for its evaluation, which comes out as having more value in God’s eyes? Anthropology can never be taught in seminaries as a totally humanistic discipline, because too much depends on our making biblically based decisions; we cannot always remain anthropologically relative.

Preliminary Results

But does it actually work? Do people actually come to see themselves more clearly? Do they actually learn to respect other peoples? At the end of my latest course, I gave a questionnaire to my students. Only one student admitted to being “very ethnocentric” at the beginning of the course; most thought that they were “normally ethnocentric” or only “a little ethnocentric.” However, almost all said that their attitudes had changed for the better during the course. The only person who thought that he hadn’t changed much was already living in a bicultural environment. One quote will serve: “Now I don’t have so much ethnocentrism as before. I have started to evaluate and appreciate, more than before, the culture of others, outside and within Argentina.... I want to learn more about them [the indigenous peoples], live for a time with them, and come close to them....” Whether this assertion is actually true, only a practical situation will reveal, but what it shows is that anthropology helps in the process of self-awareness. People do become aware of their own ethnocentrism, and they learn how to recognise it. By increasing their understanding of how other societies work, their respect for those societies increases and with it comes a desire to understand more.

Conclusion

Since the most effective missions work is done through personal relationships, which must be based on respect and trust, it seems obvious to me that this is an area that requires much work before a person is sent abroad by a missions organization. My own experience as a student and teacher of anthropology has shown me that anthropological studies have a definite role to play in missionary preparation, not only to learn facts about the target group, but to actually form the attitudes that will be so pivotal to all aspects of the missionary’s work.

Endnotes


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Strategy Coordinator
Training Program
In Korea
by Tim Hyunmo Lee

The concept of “strategy coordinator” (SC) was started in the 1980s. This new missionary way of thinking developed as a means of being more effective in carrying out the Great Commission. Originally, the concept was known as NRM (non-residential missionary). The concept of the NRM has been generally misunderstood. Some have ridiculed it, saying that NRM stands for “not real missionary.” But as our philosophy of missions changes in emphasis from “harvest theory” to the emphasis on the “unreached peoples,” there has been greater recognition for the role of strategy coordinators.

In the beginning, the U.S., England, Cyprus, and Singapore provided training programs for SCs. As the churches in Korea began their mission endeavors with the unreached peoples, they decided to provide SC training programs as well. In 1999, the World Mission Training Center (WMTC) at Korea Baptist Theological Seminary implemented the SC training program for the first time.

The recommended qualifications of trainees in SC programs are (1) more than two years of experience on the mission field, (2) able to speak the language of the field, and (3) approval by his/her mission agency. These are recommended qualifications, not necessarily requirements. Personally, I recommend that these qualifications be required because not every field missionary should be trained through the SC program.

The original training programs have varied in length from a two-and-a-half-week program to a full eight-week program, which included a week-long survey trip. The program administered by the Korean WMTC in 1999 was a four-week program.

This training focused on five key components: (1) understanding the concept and task of the SC; (2) developing missionary strategies related to SC works; (3) exploring and investigating the target people groups; (4) directing resources to serve the needs of the target population; and (5) administrative and logistical preparation.

For the first key component, five hours were assigned to work through the definition/concept and vision of the SC as well as its characteristics and cultural context. For the second component, 12 hours were allocated to discuss the current trends in mission, particularly church planting movements and the Adopt-a-People campaign. Seventeen hours were devoted for the third component to explore various target groups using many video materials. The fourth component, which lasted 48 hours, was the highlight of this training program. The following issues were considered: master planning, concept of the “full court press,” strategic prayer movement, media resources, listing GCC (Great Commission Christians) resources, 100 options, case studies, and a panel discussion with local church leaders. About 22 hours were used for the fifth and last component in which reporting, finance, security, team organizing, feedback, and delegation were discussed. Training for computer and telecommunication skills was provided intermittently throughout the four-week training period.

Overall, this first course yielded satisfactory results, giving participants a new challenge and a wealth of information. The program, however, needs to be contextualized more adequately to fit Korean missionaries in their respective fields. Within the next two years, WMTC will hopes to develop a more contextualized strategy coordinator training program for Korean missionaries.

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