

# **PREPARATION FOR MISSIONARY SERVICE:**

## **training for work in a new culture**

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Though the subject of this paper, preparation for missionary service, is intended to focus on those who feel called to serve in a country and a culture other than their own, I should like to make two preliminary qualifications.

1 The mature Christian realizes that *all* are sent (missioned) by the living Lord to ministries *he* chooses. Those who go to a different country or culture will have different needs and different stresses, but qualitatively there is no difference and the 'missionary' is not in a class apart.

2 In the home country we have experienced and continue to experience rapid changes in our culture, and with the large influx of immigrants and the influence of eastern philosophies we are in an increasingly cosmopolitan, pluralistic society. We need therefore to be aware of the need for training in cross-cultural mission for home ministries as well as for overseas service, in order to communicate effectively across racial and religious boundaries as well as those of class and generation.

I shall be looking at the subject under three headings: selection, training and pastoral care.

### **Selection**

It almost goes without saying that the local church is the most important channel under God for both recognizing and fostering

gifts given by the Spirit to individual members of the fellowship and also for encouraging a wider use of these gifts as appropriate. The truly biblical church will also have a world vision and will be generous in its giving of time for intercession for situations and people, in its giving of money where such help is appropriate, and also in its readiness to give valued members of the fellowship for ministry in other places (NB: Barnabas and Paul, mature and gifted leaders, were gladly given by the church in Antioch).

The church will be spiritually realistic in its assessment of both the call and the person called, for it is very easy in the joy of responding to the Lord's call to cross physical and cultural boundaries in proclaiming the good news to overlook vulnerable areas of personality and character.

We need to remember the enormous pressures our young people face today which mould thinking and behaviour, quite apart from remembering that many come from broken or unstable homes. For this reason I shall begin by looking at personal and social factors to be borne in mind, since these are often the very areas which are overlooked in focusing on a person's 'spiritual' contribution. Obviously to know these areas will require time and it will not be sufficient just to invite a person to meet a group of elders in order to discuss their sense of call. Individual elders will need to spend a leisurely time of sharing with the person before a corporate decision is made about the Lord's leading.

I am indebted to Dr Marjory Foyle, who after many years of service in India is in the middle of a three-year survey of missionary personnel, for her assessment of the kind of people we should expect the Lord to send into demanding situations.

*Personal factors* Dr Foyle feels that they will be people who have at least the beginnings of a realistic understanding of themselves, including some understanding of their own strengths and weaknesses (cf Paul who was not afraid of admitting weakness to the Corinthian church). She points out that there is a very thin line between strengths and weaknesses. Strengths can quickly become weaknesses if we are not aware of this. For example, the strength of the gift of caring can easily become the weakness of over-involvement; the strength of the gift of leadership can become authoritarianism or dogmatism which stifles growth. They will also have some understanding of personal interaction and of how their own particular personality affects or irritates others and of ways and means of containing it under God! Above all they will be seeking to

have a humble, teachable spirit and will recognize that they will need to go on learning all their lives.

*Social factors* We should be looking for mature people who have been proved, publicly, privately and professionally; people who are neither overly dependent on parents or other authority figures or running away from them in offering for service overseas. If they come from difficult homes there should be evidence of some understanding of their home situations and compassionate understanding of their parents and coming to terms with both in a positive spiritual way. This is important because unresolved problems with parents shown in negative reactions or hostility or depression can so easily affect relations with senior colleagues in similar ways. With today's easy global travel it can be important to check that people are not running away in disillusionment with the home scene, especially its unemployment, to what appears to be a more satisfying or glamorous prospect with opportunity for travel. Sometimes a pattern of frequent job changes can be a pointer to a restless spirit which cannot put down roots.

If the candidates are married we should look for a realistic awareness of any area of tension in their marriage and a growing awareness of its causes and of how to start doing something about it; and most important of all, a knowledge of how to make bridgeheads. They should be those who have real communication on a day-to-day basis and a willingness to go on working at communication; who know how to resolve disagreements and to put right a quarrel; who know how to say sorry and be in the open with God and others; who know each other's pressure points as well as their own and what is needed when the partner is under pressure. Such sensitivity to help each other is a prerequisite for helping others, but also, a marriage needs to be adequately rooted and growing before being exposed to the heavy pressure of another culture.

Single people need to be those who are aware of the particular pressures of singleness in societies where singleness is rare, and therefore often misunderstood. Such pressures can be considerably eased, though, when they can be talked about openly.

*Spiritual factors* Above all we should seek people with a good spiritual grounding. People who on the one hand are able to stand alone before God and are able to survive and even grow when they have little fellowship with others (without developing into loners!). On the other hand they will be those who understand and enter into

the New Testament reality of the body of Christ and what it means to be members one of another and to bear one another's burdens; people who are therefore open to being strengthened and helped by national brethren. In other words people with a spiritual understanding of what it is to be members of the body of Christ wherever they find themselves.

### **Training**

There are some who would advocate full training in and through the local church while others advocate a period at a suitable college for more concentrated, focused preparation. Personally I feel both/and, not either/or, provides the best of both worlds and gives the most balanced preparation. In our own college community it is significant that it is often those who are older and who have had some experience overseas who are most aware of their need for further preparation.

I feel the overall aim of training is to foster the growth of men and women of God; helping them move forward in their understanding of God, themselves and others; helping them also to grow in their awareness of the reality of spiritual warfare and how it is to be waged.

We are also seeking to foster a consciousness of utter dependence on God, a spirit of lifelong learning, a reasonable adaptability and adequate inner resources and motivation. Training should also test and develop both spiritual gifts and appropriate skills.

The good local church will have laid spiritual foundations and earthed biblical understanding in everyday life, but it will rarely have the resources of time or expertise to give the thorough preparation required for work overseas. It will also be rare that the prospective missionary will have had time to grapple with his faith in a way which will enable him to be at ease in a cross-cultural communication of spiritual truths in the way that he is at ease in his professional skills. Indeed, most will have spent many years in training for a profession and it is a small thing in that perspective to give one or two years to being better fitted to minister in a cross-cultural situation. Only living and ministering in that situation can enable him to be at ease, but much spadework can be done in preparation.

Apart from the time given to worship and to a concentrated study of the scriptures both privately and corporately, it will therefore be important to have preparation for communication to those of other faiths by disciplined study of those faiths in a theological as well as a cultural context.

We need to avoid purely western theological, systematized approaches which may prevent us from relating our faith to those of another culture and philosophy. So the missionary in training needs to be taught how to relate his theology to the communication of the faith to those of other religions. He may need to learn how to relate the Christian doctrine of the trinity to a Hindu or a Muslim, his theology of revelation to the very different Muslim concept, or his belief in a personal God to the impersonal heaven of the Confucian. Or to give another example, without sensitive communication the Christian message 'you must be born again' will be heard by Hindu ears as simply underlining the threat of reincarnation.

But in addition, since above all we are sent to persons, people need sensitive awareness of the whole way of life and norms of behaviour of those among whom they will be living. Inappropriate dress or actions can jeopardize relationships. This was brought home to me when a colleague shared how a Christian leader at an international conference on Christian mission in an Asian country, longing to share the good news of Christ, stood outside a Buddhist temple in a crowded street and shouted at the top of his voice, 'Jesus is Lord'. Ironically, far from communicating truth, his attempt would have made it even more difficult for those around to understand, let alone believe. In that particular culture to shout is considered gross, and so his very shouting would have closed ears. In any case he spoke in English and so few would have understood his statement: even if they had, the word 'Lord' is also used for the 'Lord Buddha' and has no sense of divinity or authority. Furthermore the word 'is' with its implication of continued existence indicates to a Buddhist that Jesus has not yet attained nirvana and so is not fully enlightened and is therefore inferior to the Buddha. Ideally therefore, training should include living contact with those from different cultures so that thorough understanding of different ways of life is built up (cf 1 Corinthians 9:19-23).

Training should also include a modicum of instruction in essential practical skills both in a church and secular context (eg basic communication and teaching skills; tropical hygiene and nutrition, emergency dentistry, car maintenance, etc., where appropriate). Research into geographical, socio-economic and political factors in the country to which they go is also valuable.

It is important that the person has adequate and appropriate professional training. Indeed in some countries only those able to offer higher qualifications can gain entry. High professional qualifications may enable some to enter otherwise closed lands, and

'tent-making' ministries through the 'non-professional' missionary can be of great importance. Such people need as much training and support as the 'professional' for often they find themselves in very isolated situations. It must not be forgotten that skilled secretaries, mechanics, carpenters, builders, and particularly those who are able to pass on those skills to others, can make an invaluable contribution to the local church and to the country to which they go.

But above all there needs to be time and space for spiritual and emotional growth and development. This will include a healthy, growing relationship with the Lord, linked with a healthy and growing understanding of themselves and others. As my colleague Martin Goldsmith wrote about pastoral counselling in a paper on cross-cultural mission training:

I have left until last what may in the long run be one of the most significant aspects of College training. Students must learn to understand themselves as well as being able to help others pastorally. Tutors will need to work intimately and deeply with their students in this. A right balance between the pastoral relevance of the loving grace of the Lord plus the power of the Holy Spirit and the world's scientific understanding of the human personality is not easily found, but it is very important. We all know the growing insecurities and instabilities of western man; this applies also to Christians and we need desperately to help our students to face the realities of their own backgrounds and personalities. If we fail in this, we shall pour out into our churches and missions a horde of men and women with deep unresolved insecurities—and they will be of little help to their flocks pastorally.

Closely connected with pastoral counselling comes the issue of the growing involvement of many in the West with occultism and spiritism. This leaves fearful scars on the spiritual lives and personalities of many Christians, including some among our own students. Both in Britain and even more overseas the realities of spiritual warfare are of vital significance. If we do not teach our students how to handle the occult, we shall have left them with an irrelevant and inadequate preparation for the actualities of their future ministries. We have found this aspect of our teaching and training at All Nations of primary significance. (Martin Goldsmith—pre-conference paper on Cross-Cultural Missionary Training for Wheaton '83)

An illustration of this second point is a Dutch teacher who, on coming to college, found herself unable to read the missionary biography *Roaring Lion* by Robert Peterson of the Overseas Missionary Fellowship without being plunged into terror with an evil face coming between her and the book she was reading. A

sharing of her experiences before conversion revealed that as a university student she had become seriously involved with Sufi mysticism and I Ching and had never consciously renounced them, although she no longer practised them, nor had she been set free in the name of Jesus from any lingering effects. Once this was done she experienced a deep deliverance from fear.

Dr Marjory Foyle feels that the experience of living while training in a multi-racial community and of learning to handle interpersonal relationships and problems is irreplaceable. She stresses that the pressures of missionary life will release even more our negative emotions of resentment, jealousy, pride and bitterness, and it is therefore vital that we stand with people as they learn to handle these before they go.

### **Pastoral care**

Given this laying of good foundations in preparation it will then be of paramount importance that the local church tangibly stands with the missionary as he/she goes. Realistic arrangements need to be made for good two-way communication so that there can be informed intelligent praying and giving. In addition to the more general prayer of the whole church, many missionaries value having a small committed group with whom they can share more confidential matters for prayer. Regular covenanted giving can release a person from unnecessary strain and is a scriptural principle. Tapes and books and financial provision for recreational needs can also make a valuable contribution to a person's wellbeing. Through the one who goes, the home church has the great privilege of being involved in the extension of the kingdom and the building up of the church thousands of miles away. But this will not happen without a truly spiritual partnership which will involve commitment at every level—spiritual, emotional and material.

In these days of easy and rapid travel a church's understanding and commitment can be expressed and deepened by the occasional pastoral visit to the missionary in his or her own context. In addition, there is often a place for a visit by a member of the fellowship who can offer practical help through an extended visit if they have the appropriate skills to make such a contribution. The gain will not be one-way, for the visitor will undoubtedly bring back important insights to share with the home church which will stimulate prayer.

When the time comes for home leave the sending church needs to be particularly sensitive to the realities of reverse culture shock and

the importance therefore for making arrangements for a real holiday at the beginning of leave (some prefer to have this on the way to Britain), a good medical check-up, space for leisurely time with family and friends and also with individual elders so that there can be appropriate sharing of areas of concern and pressure. Some members of the fellowship will be particularly gifted in pastoral care and they should be encouraged to exercise this. It is vital that the person or family on leave are able to have as normal a life as possible, and care should be given long before leave to the provision of suitable housing, transport and schools for children. Beware of putting them on a pedestal! They need normal and natural friendship. While the local church will realize the importance of formal as well as informal meetings with all sections of the church, it is important not to pressurize home leave. The timing and length of home leave will naturally be determined by the needs of the individual and their family and the needs of the fellowship they serve overseas.

We are called to love as Christ loved us. As we give ourselves to each other in sensitive and consistent support and care we have a joyful share in building up the body of Christ worldwide.

For further reading:

Martin Goldsmith (ed) *Love your Local Missionary* (Marc Europe, 1984).

Rhena Taylor *Rough Edges* (IVP, 1978).

Martin Goldsmith *Don't Just Stand There!* (IVP/Send the Light, 1976).