



Educational Preparation of Missionaries: A Look Ahead¹

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Every decision about curriculum reflects someone's view of the future. This key premise of educational planning is widely accepted by curriculum specialists. What views of the future are reflected in current approaches to missionary preparation? When mission agencies decide how much of what sort of education to require for missionary candidates, or when educational institutions shape missions degrees, each makes an unmistakable assumption about some particular future. A look at this future might reveal some areas that beg re-consideration.

Some people have made hazardous assumptions about the relationship between educational preparation and missionary competency. Few people will readily confess holding these views, but any person, organization, or institution whose feet fit any of the following "shoes" is encouraged to own up to it.

Presupposition No. 1: *What we have been doing will be adequate for the future.*

This common presupposition is stubborn. Statistics on missionary failure during the first term are well-hidden, so the status quo persists with little challenge. The assumption that present educational approaches are adequate—even for the world situation as it is now—is vulnerable. The restlessness of new missionaries, their tentative and experimental approach to discovering if they will "like missions," raises serious questions about education.

What image of missions and its demands on the person have been taught? In some cases, present educational approaches nurture an image of missions as a career option, rather than a distinct calling to ministry. This orientation may be taught informally. Or, it may be a natural outcome of the "me-centeredness" of contemporary society. In this case, missionary education may be criticized for failing to effectively challenge and replace faulty images.

Though reasonable and important, the evident preoccupation with such issues as living conditions, standards, and practices of education for their children, and even retirement plans strongly suggests today's missionaries are educated more for strength of head than heart.

Social science researchers have identified the ability to take risks as one of the most vital leadership characteristics. Spiritually-driven risk-taking may be the vital catalyst that turns a head full of knowledge into a life of committed action. If making people knowledgeable is all that missions education is about, then it is inadequate not only for the future, but for the present as well.

Even where the head and heart dilemma is not an issue, presuppositions about the adequacy of present education for the future must be challenged. It is unreasonable to believe the future will simply be a continuation of the present. The situations with which missionaries deal today are apt to be child's play compared to what seems likely to unfold. The likelihood of a future loaded with new and more difficult conditions raises some questions about educational requirements for the next generation of missionaries. Most missionary planners and executives give some attention to need for change, but complacency works against substantial challenges to the educational status quo.

¹ Ted Ward. Educational Preparation of Missionaries: A Look Ahead. *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*. Vol. 23, no. 4 (Oct 1987): 398-404. Used with permission.

Presupposition No. 2: *Since the future is beyond our knowledge, we cannot prepare for it.*

The premise is irrefutable, but the conclusion is absurd. Laziness takes many forms; one of the worst is the sort of institutional tradition that defends inaction with pious reasoning. Since “we see through a glass, darkly,” we shouldn’t bother to look. But surely the rapidly changing world is not without discernible patterns. For example, the formerly respectable image of the missionary as a politically neutral bystander is steadily being replaced by awareness that every American overseas is a potential target for political hostage-taking.

Can it reasonably be argued it is not possible to anticipate the ways emerging nations will assert their sovereignty? The observable patterns of change do not support a “business as usual” approach to missions.

The missionary, who is properly prepared for tomorrow, must thoroughly understand why the world is changing. Simplistic propositions that see nuances and shifts only in terms of increasing sinfulness or spiritual battles handicap the missionary. The mental process skill most needed for tomorrow is the capacity for expectation toward, and openness to, new information and insights. Closed-formula reasoning and judgmental dichotomizing can and should be replaced. These handicapping mental processes are learned, just as surely as any missionary has the capacity to think, not merely remember.

Presupposition No. 3: *The missionary of tomorrow must be thoroughly prepared.*

This presupposition sounds sensible, but it is hazardous nonetheless. Its major flaw is the underlying notion that the purpose of education is to teach the student so much of the “right stuff” that success is inevitable. A more humble and sane view suggests preparatory education is not the whole of a person’s investment in learning.

Preparatory education should establish the basic orientations, skills, and understandings needed to cope reasonably well with early encounters in the real world of ministry and to set the stage for a pattern of continued learning. Formal education, especially in its preparatory modes, cannot make the person so knowledgeable and competent that forever and always the appropriate knowledge and skills may simply be recalled from the baggage and files of pre-service education.

When education is attuned to yesterday’s—or even today’s—needs, it is inadequate. Only preparation for continuing education and development is adequate. Nothing less will allow the student to make the changes needed to deal with the future as it unfolds. Thus, the knowledge and skills that count most are those that will establish a sound foundation for disciplined, yet responsive, change. Unless it develops the capacity to change one’s skills and understanding to keep pace with contextual realities, education is faulty.

Preparing for the Future

Several of David Hesselgrave’s trends² suggest a fundamental dilemma for missionary education. A reading of his trends suggests tomorrow’s missionary will need more comparative studies. A more knowledgeable approach to contextual differences among human societies will be needed in order to constructively use circumstances and relations both in the multi-faceted missionary community and in evangelization of a multi-religious society.



² David Hesselgrave. Major Trends and Issues in World Missions Today. *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*. Vol 23, no. 3 (July 1987): 299-305

Knowing yourself and holding to your own viewpoints is not enough. It is important to know and empathize with those to whom—and with whom—you minister. Knowing where you stand on critical issues is important, but how well do you comprehend where others stand?

Hesselgrave's view of the future suggests educational treatments that present other problems. Should social science and methodological training displace the time needed for more precise theological and Biblical training?

If preparatory education is intended to thoroughly ground the candidate's whole career, the competition for precious time and mental energy is overwhelming. Nevertheless, the social science resources must be tapped; responsible access to the riches of common grace demand it. The pragmatic realities of an increasingly brittle world of social and political conflict put the missionary at a serious disadvantage if the means of comprehending the context have been neglected.

Traditions can be the Problem

One of the few enduring books in the field of educational curriculum is an allegorical satire by Harold Benjamin, renowned curriculum theorist and university administrator. Writing under a pseudonym, J. Abner Peddiwell, Benjamin told the tale of a Paleolithic society where an outdated curriculum led to ruin. In the Saber-Tooth Curriculum, formerly-useful skills and knowledge, such as how to frighten off saber-toothed tigers, were kept as the core of the curriculum. Never mind that the saber-toothed tigers had become extinct long ago. In Benjamin's fabled society, as in ours, educational values tend to be enshrined perpetually in the images and modes of formal education.

In Benjamin's allegory, the incapacity to deal with the future dragged a society into incompetency and, ultimately, oblivion. The lesson is clear. The demise of a society, organization, or movement—even a mode of doing God's business—can result from mindless perpetuation of the past.

Any responsible look ahead must deal with some overlooked and unresolved matters already in dire need of attention.

Programs for Tent-makers

If the international Christian movement continues in the direction of tent-making, educational programs will be sorely needed. Apart from the typically vague requirement (often waived) of a year of Bible college or seminary studies, hardly any consensus has emerged on the nature of appropriate educational experience for the "avocational" (or "dual-vocational") missionary.

Once again, the key issue is appropriate curriculum. Because of heavy educational demands for the "cover" vocation or profession, theological education is assumed by some to be the straw that breaks the camel's back. While the need to develop viable, marketable skills cannot be overlooked, substantial theological understanding must also be assured. But then, promoting a vast array of courses that it would be "nice for these people to have" is not the right approach to the problem.

Dealing with Short-Term Missionaries

The mission's community has not yet figured out what to do with the short-term worker. Somewhere between tourist and junior partner, the short-termer has been more a curiosity than a contributor. Part of the problem can be traced to the wildly erratic and unpredictable assortment of backgrounds of the people who volunteer for short-term missionary activity.

The lack of consensus about appropriate educational background and the failure of mission organizations to adequately invest in appropriate pre-assignment training have virtually trapped the movement in ill-conceived and mutually disappointing deployments.

This uncertainty is a symptom of a larger problem. Missionary activity is carved out of what Bible college and seminary graduates are able to do—rather than out of a specific analysis of the tasks that need to be done by missionaries.

In other words, as it stands today, education is the starting place for defining missionary work, rather than the other way around. The needs of the Church and requirements for effective missionary

service should be the starting place for defining and planning missionary education. Short-term missionaries just happen to be the people most obviously caught in the crunch.

Displaced Institutional Personnel

Little imaginative planning has been devoted to the tough problem of deploying the substantial army of missionaries in educational, medical, and media institutions around the world. Not everyone agrees that when churches are planted, their institutions should be re-shaped to conform to local resources and needs. But, unless this problem is given more careful attention, the future of missions will certainly hold more anguish.

Just as surely as E. F. Schumacher identified “inappropriate technologies,”³ we must understand that there are “inappropriate institutions.” So long as North American educational mills continue to grind out operators for such institutions, it will be hard to achieve responsible inter-dependency among the world’s churches.

This is a problem not only of policy, but of education. North American educational institutions must come to grips with two aspects of the issue.

1. What sorts of institutional personnel are really needed? Should they be missionaries or nationals? Where should they be educated? In what traditions and to what standards should they be educated?
2. What training or re-training should be available to assist in the re-deployment of those who are necessarily displaced in this process?

Some of the saddest stories in missions today are told about missionaries who received no



help in finding ways to re-train themselves for worthy contributions to the church and communities at home after being “moved along” in the process of clearing the way for national persons who have taken their places within institutions.

And what can be done for those who stay in the field without much purpose or fulfillment after they have been displaced, simply because they have no other place to go?

Preparing Urban Missionaries

Missionary recruitment, especially among independent and evangelical North American denominational churches, largely takes place in rural or suburban areas, and among White people. One might be tempted to think there is a conspiracy to ensure a social and experiential distance between missionary candidates and the emerging needs of urban missions. Expanding the world view of such missionaries is an educational task of the first order.

To achieve the re-orientation needed for the new frontiers in missions, education increasingly must be based on experience, rather than just “book-learning.” In recent years, the most relevant experiential learning patterns have been developed in orientation-and-internship centers for missionary preparation, like Missionary Internship.

Some theological seminaries are now moving in this direction. Some Bible colleges are re-discovering their experiential learning heritage, and are offering field-based encounters for urban and inter-ethnic missionary preparation.

Realistic Limits

Education cannot cure all ills. Formal education can facilitate a person’s development, replace certain deficiencies of environmental experience with a schooled alternative, and correct some

³ E. F. Schumacher. *Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered*. New York: Harper and Row, 1975.

misunderstandings and misinformation. But it is not of much value in re-shaping personality traits and overcoming prejudice.

There will never be a good substitute for encouraging people to enter missions who have a heart for the work and whose motives are already “turned on” by a Christ-centered compassion. Borderline candidates should be given the opportunity to develop further and prove themselves. But mission organizations should not be so eager to fill quotas and to increase the overall budget that they recruit unpromising people—especially those whose gifts have not been affirmed.

Educational administrators have had their long-range planning strategies in place for several decades. But it was curriculum development people who introduced futuristics into educational planning—even before administrators discovered the management value of deliberate study of the meanings of trends and of the potential for discontinuity in human society. Looking ahead is not just a management tool; it is an important guideline for making wise education investments.