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**Producing Quality Training Through Partnerships:
Assemblies, Academics, and Agencies**

Tom Steffen

It seems that everyone involved in training cross-cultural church planters has his or her ideas about what constitutes quality training, what roles certain institutions should take. Some institutions consider two weeks sufficient, others require two years of Bible, while still others will accept nothing less than an M.Div. Some believe the local church(es) exclusively should provide the training. A number rely on agencies or academic training institutions. Some rely heavily on cognitive knowledge gained while others want trainees to receive heavy hands-on experience to test commitment and character. Some focus entirely on pre-field training while others include on-field training. A growing number have added post-field training (during furlough).

In this article I will argue for two things. First, no institution at home or abroad, whether the local church, an agency or an academic institution, should attempt to provide the complete credentialing package needed to produce faithful cross-cultural church planters. Second, all training should be ministry-long (eight to twelve years). The article begins with three case studies presented by students in my Principles of Church Planting class. I will then interact with the case studies and suggest an integrated partnership model of graduated structured stress that should produce more effective quality training.

Three Case Studies

It should be noted that the case studies below are not intended to demean those who participated in them—or the churches,

agencies or academic training institutions they represent. Rather, I present them to demonstrate the complexity of the church planting task, and the need for ministry-long training within the context of institutional partnerships.

Case Study One: To the CIS With Love

In 1991, a coalition of churches set a goal to plant churches in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). To accomplish this goal, they planned to send initial teams to plant churches, followed by other teams to provide follow-up. Before leaving for ministry, team members received several months of evangelism and follow-up training, along with tips for living in a different cultural milieu.

When the initial team arrived in the CIS, it went to where there was a need which they felt God was calling them to meet. They procured translators to convey their message. Through the translators, team members immediately conducted street drama and preaching. They invited willing seekers to be their personal guests at the nightly services. Two weeks after the first team arrival, their team returned home, having planted a church.

To train pastors and provide follow-up in the newly formed churches, the churches depended on several strategies. They commissioned "nurturing teams" to go to the CIS for "a few weeks to a year or more" to provide grounding in the Word. American pastors also flew over to provide short-term, one-on-one training. Taped Bible studies and videos from the USA served as the training curricula. Certain nationals were selected and sponsored to attend Bible college in the States, and eventually return to the CIS to take up ministry positions. Less than two years after pronouncing the initial goal, the sending churches reported their teams had planted nine additional churches.

Case Study Two: To Russia With Love

The frontier church planting team spent five weeks in a city in the former Soviet Union. During the five-week stay, they acquired all the information they could on the target people and the city because the agency provided them no background information. At the same time, team members were to share the gospel and disciple new believers.

One team member commented: "We went in with our guns firing but with little awareness of their lifestyles or even follow

up for their crucial months ahead." While the short-term trip changed the seminarian's life forever, he sadly discovered later that most of those who made "decisions for Christ" lost interest in their "summer decision." The chance to tell family and friends that they had associated with Americans seemed to influence the decision-making process more than Jesus Christ.

Case Study Three: To Europe With Love

The church planting team formed abroad ad hoc, had no previous church planting experience, gave little attention to team development, demographics, language or culture learning, the time required to see churches born and equipped, consider what the new church should look like, or agree upon a coordinated vision statement. They began with a door-to-door survey which produced a strong response, but like a tender green shoot in the desert, soon wilted under the unrelenting noon sun. After several months, the team began a second follow-up. Five came to know the Lord, including one tourist. Follow-up became virtually impossible as no one would give out addresses; the church plant folded.

But the team did not give up. They began a prayer time and initiated another church plant among a specific people group rather than anyone who would listen. Friendship evangelism produced little results, open air evangelism produced even less. No one wanted to attend anything "Christian."

In time, a small group of believers emerged. Again, the team elected to use the cell group model. Furloughs took certain church planters in and out of the picture. As team members prepared the growing group for division into smaller cell groups, it became evident some preferred a more traditional church model. They found it very difficult to get attendees involved in any aspect of service or leadership. Some of the families moved, leaving two weak cell groups. Within 14 months another church plant ground to an abrupt halt.

Interaction with the Case Studies

The three case studies mentioned above signal the need for tighter coordinated pre-field, on-field, and post-field training. They also highlight the need for institutional partnerships (at home and abroad) to provide such ministry-long training. While I applaud the vision, passion, fervor, commitment, and entrepre-

neurship of the team members, I worry about a ministry pattern I have observed all too often—one that fails to take into consideration the complexity of the church planting task.

Hesselgrave captures my concern, and hope, in the following comment made after hearing Paul Fleming, founder of New Tribes Mission in 1942, speak in chapel:

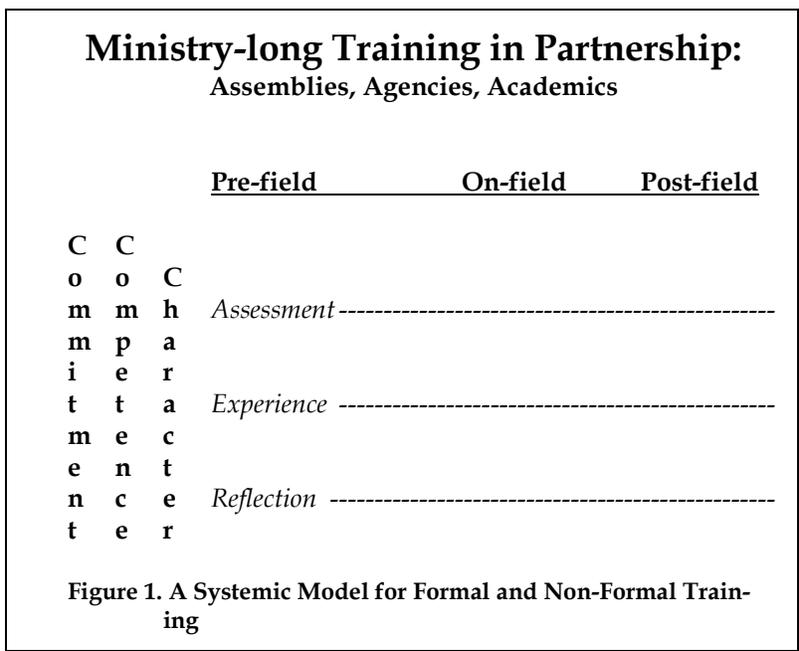
He was indeed a man of vision and passion, but he greatly oversimplified the task of world evangelization, leaving the strong impression that the message of John 3:16 is sufficient for its completion and that anyone, with or without special gifts, abilities and training, can communicate John 3:16. It did not require an extended time on the mission field to realize that that simply is not the case. It is especially significant that now after fifty years, New Tribes Mission supplies a much needed corrective [the Chronological Teaching approach] (Hesselgrave 1994:119).

Cross-cultural church planters must not rely solely on passion, entrepreneurship, or spontaneity, but like the airplane pilot boarding a plane full of passengers, also know the "when's," "what's," "where's," "how's," and "why's" of the trade.

Cross-cultural church planters must take the time to earn the right to be heard; Furthermore, they must be heard by the right people. Language and culture acquisition will make this goal more attainable than will relying on translators. Should team members vault these hurdles, they will have a much better grasp of the decision-making patterns of the contact culture, the information necessary to provide a solid foundation for the Gospel, what constitutes contextual teaching and curricula, and what will be necessary for responsible phase-out to occur (disengagement of team members [Steffen 1993]). Must trial-and-error church planting be repeated every time a new country opens to outsiders? Can church planters not do a better job in curtailing past errors? It's possible, if, they can receive the necessary assistance from various institutions, and become learners before communicating the gospel message. Here are some suggestions to begin and continue the partnership journey of formal and non-formal training (See Figure 1).

The Need for Systemic Partnership Training

Like much Bible training, most missionary training received comes piece-meal. A little theology here, a little character development there; a little experience here, a little cross-cultural communication there; a little evangelism here, a little follow-up there; a little prayer here, a little spiritual warfare there. What can be done to provide church planter-multipliers a more unified training? The answer to this question may be found by asking several prior questions: (1) What does a church planter have to do in order to plant multiplying churches in a cross-cultural context? (2) What type of individual (character, commitment, competency) will it take to see the first question answered? Once the profile is established in partnership (question #2), an intentional, integrated training program can begin. It starts pre-field, continues on-field, and post-field. [See Steffen 1993:38-53 for an application of the church planter's profile.]



The Need to Assess

Pre-field training can begin with a local church's short-term vision trips. Benchmarks in commitment, competency, and char-

acter will reflect the tiered age levels of the participants. But unlike most short-term trips, emphasis should be placed on taking a "learner" role, rather than a "helper" role. Minimal basic language and culture studies will begin to demonstrate the complexity of the church planting task and the necessity for long-term, team players. Problems faced by national believers will provide new insights into culturally biased interpretations of Scripture. Communication styles appreciated by the contact culture will help expand the participants' delivery systems. Team activities will point out the need for unity and clarity of vision. Vision trips provide an excellent opportunity to reshape cross-cultural ministry expectations. Like Paul, trainers can say to participants, "we did warn you what to expect" (1 Thes. 3:4, Phillips).

Training in Bible and cross-cultural communication must not be neglected. Responsible team members will want to arrive well-prepared in both disciplines. Numerous formal and informal institutions can provide the initial and continuous training in these areas. Christian workers can select those institutions that best provide the specific training needed.

Another pre-field training activity could be a four-day assessment. Based on the assumption that observation is the best way to know if an individual can do a particular task, candidates participate in exercises designed specifically to simulate job-related tasks cross-cultural church planters must do. During the exercises, assessors evaluate their efforts based on the criteria that covers commitment, competence, and character, all of which were determined previously by the assessing participants. After every exercise, a team of experienced assessors rate each candidate in relation to gifts, skills, experience, and character. Candidates also receive personal interviews, take test instruments pertaining to work and leadership style preferences, and receive brief teaching modules.

Each candidate receives a Final Feedback Interview on the last day. Assessors inform the candidates of their potential for church planting, and suggest ways to improve gifts, skills, and weaknesses. [See Graham (1987) for a succinct overview of a Church Planters' Assessment Center.] The same criteria used for vision trips provide the benchmarks in assessment on a more advanced level, and throughout all upcoming training: pre-field, on-field, and post-field.

The Need for Experience

A natural post-assessment step before going abroad would be a cross-cultural ministry internship at home. In many cases today, there is no reason to go abroad for cross-cultural ministry without first experiencing it at home. But how could such training work out practically? In a previous article, I suggested that assemblies, agencies, and academics work together to plant ethnic churches (Steffen 1992). Candidates could select church plants that take place among their target people abroad, practice language and culture acquisition, and work as a team alongside veteran church planters and specialists from academic training institutions.

The simulation exercises that dealt with demographics, evangelism, discipleship, leadership, followership, contextual skills, team compatibility, cross-cultural adaptability, and church planting strategies at the Assessment Center will then take on much greater reality. Once again, the criteria established previously to access the candidate before should continue to provide the benchmarks for reaching the next step: cross-cultural ministry abroad.

The Need for Reflection

Not only must Christian workers be committed, competent doers who demonstrate impeccable character above reproach, they must also reflect continually on all these issues. In a Western ministry mindset that often argues that activity denotes progress, reflection often takes a back seat to action. More reflection time is needed if the activities of church planters are to produce commitment, competence, challenging character, and stated ministry goals.

Encourage reading. At the summer 1994 Frontiers conference in Holland, I listened to Greg Livingstone challenge the agency's church planters to become zealous readers. Greg was well aware of the antibook bias of many of the baby busters and baby boomers in the agency. A large display of books, including four of the top books on church planting (all of which are necessary to grasp the complexity of the task and the character needed), were not receiving the attention they deserved by those claiming to be heavily involved in cross-cultural church planting. Sales soon picked up after the challenge.

Today, numerous excellent journals exist to keep cross-

cultural Christian workers abreast of the latest innovations in missions. However, too few take advantage of the *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, *International Journal of Frontier Mission*, *Missiology*, *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, *Global Church Growth: Strategies for Today's Leaders*, and the annual publication of the *Evangelical Missiological Society*.

Such a lack of reading raises a number of pertinent questions. Must the weaknesses of one generation of cross-cultural church planters perpetuate themselves? Does God ever cease to pick up the pieces of our negligence? What might happen in the area of reflection if a church planting team assigned every member to subscribe to one of the above journals and then alert fellow team members to pertinent articles, seminars, courses, and book reviews? Encouragement from the various institutions can promote better stewardship in this area. This encouragement may require gift subscriptions for team members.

Encourage lifelong study. Institutions should encourage church planters to schedule time for formal and informal training during pre-field, on-field, and post-field phases of ministry. Why? Because ministry challenges soon surpass pre-field training, not to mention that team members tire emotionally, spiritually, physically, and mentally. Every cell of a battery needs to be recharged periodically: the body, the mind, and the spirit. Dead batteries cannot be used effectively to start weak batteries in the physical or the spiritual world.

Once abroad, training should keep pace with ministry activities. As the ministry depth increases and broadens, so should training. Agencies and academics may be the best positioned to provide such training. During furloughs, assemblies and academics may best meet this need. Besides encouraging individual and family renewal, institutions should encourage team members to participate in formal and informal training activities for personal and team development.

Encourage reflection time. During pre-field activities, institutions should encourage candidates to schedule reflection time for each phase of training. Reflection of the vision trip(s), the assessment, internship, and formal and informal times with trusted mentors should prove helpful.

Reflection should cover long-term objectives, as well as short-term. What experiences has God given the team member? Toward what goal is He directing him or her? What must hap-

pen for the goal to become a reality? For some team members, informal learning opportunities, extension courses, and breaks will accomplish the goal. For others, retreating from the heat of battle to an academic setting to reflect on thorny ministry issues will be necessary. Such efforts can produce cutting edge research that will benefit the global missionary community.

After reflecting (through prayer, reading, dialogue, and taking a class in church planting) over the church plant failures mentioned in the third case study, one team member observed: "Even failure, through God's power, gets turned into wisdom for the future....We're not bitter about failing, but thank God that He carried us through it and has used it to teach us new lessons about ministry and ourselves." The wounded church planter then noted some painful lessons learned:

- ⇒ Launch every church plant with a month of prayer and fasting.
- ⇒ The church planting team models the church in nucleus. Be careful.
- ⇒ Team members need to commit for the long haul, not just in two years.
- ⇒ The lack of a clear vision produces team conflict.
- ⇒ The lack of language/cultural acquisition and research produces a stilted message.
- ⇒ By trying to reach all cultures, we effectively reached none.

Should God give this individual another opportunity to plant a church, he will approach the task much differently, no matter what the outcome. One wonders how this church plant and the others mentioned in the case studies might have ended if the teams had begun with these available insights, all of which institutions working in partnership could have provided.

Conclusion

In a previous article I noted four existing realities:

Reality One: Churches demand more input in missions than supplying the personnel and paying the bills (Camp 1993).

Reality Two: Agencies will merge, not go away.

Reality Three: Academics will adopt new delivery systems.

Reality Four: Cross-cultural missions is a very sophisticated

endeavor (Steffen 1994).

In light of these realities, what can institutions do to provide cross-cultural church planters quality training that continues ministry-long? Zeal, entrepreneurship, passion, fervor, and dedication certainly have their place. Yet these can be synergized when harnessed to the Trilogy Team of assemblies, agencies, and academics. Such a partnership can offer the best total package for ministry-long training: recruiter, assessor, trainer, supporter, sender, and preserver.

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