Preparing Melanesians for Missions

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About the Author

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Introduction

Melanesia is the area of the South Pacific that is northeast of Australia and includes the countries of Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, New Caledonia, Vanuatu, and Fiji. Christianity came to Melanesia recently in world history, arriving on the shores in the nineteenth century and penetrating into the interiors in the twentieth century. Christianity has grown tremendously since its introduction in Melanesia, to the point that countries in Melanesia are referred to as “Christian nations.” There are few Western missionaries still working in Melanesia, most having left to concentrate their efforts in “non-Christian nations.” The churches in Melanesia are now starting to send out their own missionaries to play their part in global missions. That brings us to the focus of this paper, preparing Melanesians for missions. There are two goals for this paper. The first goal is to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of Melanesians as missionaries in light of their cultural background. Based on that evaluation, the second goal is to determine how best to prepare Melanesians for missions based on these – admittedly generalized – strengths and weaknesses.

Before we begin, a bit of background information is needed. I am an American missionary serving with the mission agency Pioneers and teaching in Papua New Guinea at a Bible college called the Christian Leaders’ Training College. I have been at the Bible college for thirteen years (discounting study leaves), and I teach a variety of Bible, theology, and missions courses. The college is an accredited educational institution which offers undergraduate and graduate degrees. We are seeking to increase our missions training to help churches in Melanesia fulfill the Great Commission, which makes the opportunity to write and present this paper both timely and relevant to the work of my college.

Melanesia is a kinship culture where tribal allegiance is paramount. Despite the prevalence of Christianity in Melanesia, there is still an undercurrent of animism. From an economic standpoint, many Melanesians live in villages and rely on subsistence farming. Within this cultural context of tribalism, animism, and subsistence agriculture, the Christian Leaders’ Training College seeks to provide education pertinent to the background and needs of the students.
Before we continue, a caveat is in order. In this paper I use the singular phrase “Melanesian culture” for the sake of simplicity. This is not to deny that cultural variations exist within Melanesia. This is perhaps most strongly exhibited in cultural distinctions between people from the coast and those from the highlands of Papua New Guinea. Despite these variations, there are many cultural commonalities across Melanesia which permit me to speak of the culture as somewhat of a whole. Still, generalizations which I make in this paper may surely be contested by some readers, and I welcome further dialogue in this regard.

Melanesians as Missionaries

A few graduates of the Christian Leaders’ Training College serve with the mission organization SIM Australia. As part of my research for this paper, I asked David Hammer, Pacific Region Ministry Director for SIM Australia, three questions: What are Melanesians’ strengths for mission work? What are Melanesians’ weaknesses for mission work? What definitely should be included in training Melanesians for missions? He queried his co-workers at SIM Australia and then formed a response based on SIM’s collective experience in sending out Melanesians as missionaries.3

Strengths to Applaud

Melanesians bring a number of strengths to the mission field. They value prayer and spend a great deal of time communicating with God. Rather than being individualistic and standoffish, they are more collectivistic and relationally-oriented than persons in the west. Melanesians are also conscious of the spirit world, realizing its potential significance. Melanesians are also generally adaptable, tough, and easy-
going, able to live frugally and exhibit patience in adverse circumstances. Finally, they have a deep concern for the lost; they want to reach the unreached for Christ.

Challenges to Overcome

The challenges facing Melanesians on the mission field in addition to the strengths just named – which could surely be elaborated upon – should be the key drivers for designing a missionary training program.

**Communication.** Melanesians prefer personal verbal communication to non-personal written communication. They also prefer to communicate indirectly and frequently talk around an issue while at the same time talking about the issue. Since English is a second or third language for most Melanesians, they can struggle with English, especially in writing and reading.

**Technology.** The modern missionary movement is highly technical and missionaries are required to have skills in this area. However, most Melanesians lack sufficient word processing, spreadsheet, and internet skills that are necessary for missions today. Compounding this fact is the challenge they face in communicating with their supporters in Melanesia. Supporters who live in rural environments normally do not have access to technology. Technology also plays a role today in the transference of money. A lack of on-line banking expertise affects both missionaries and their supporters.

**Allegiance.** Melanesians come from a tribal background where tribal loyalty is paramount. This emphasis can carry over to devotion to their denominations and can become a new sort of tribalism which limits collaborative mission efforts across denominations. This emphasis on allegiance can also influence relationships among Melanesian missionaries – especially those relationships comprised of people from different tribes and geographical locations, most notably between those from the coastal areas and those from the highlands in Papua New Guinea.
Cultural Personality. Melanesians are not as concerned about clock time as Westerners. This can result in such things as neglected e-mails or text messages. Moreover, if Melanesians feel offended by the communication, they will not answer e-mails. Melanesians focus on events rather than the clock, which influences the process of giving financial support in Melanesia. The concept of regular support is not practiced, with churches preferring to give one big offering in lieu of regular monthly giving. Church financial support often is inadequate. Additionally, Melanesians tend to be compliant and reactive in hierarchical structures, rather than proactive.

Exposure. Most Melanesians have not traveled outside of their own countries, which limits their exposure to other religions, worldviews, and cultures. People who live in towns and cities may have access to television, which would be their primary “window” to the world. Some of the population also has access to daily newspapers which offers further exposure. Related to exposure, in a sense, is education. Primary and secondary formal education standards may not be on par with educational systems of the West. Melanesians, therefore, may not be as formally prepared educationally for missions as needed. One way this is particularly evident is in the lack of qualifications for entry into some countries; frequently persons have few verifiable professional skills to gain an entry visa.

Requirements. With this in mind, SIM Australia is working towards a standard of requirements for those coming from Melanesia as missionaries. Future requirements will include the following:

1. Proven English proficiency – verbal and written;
2. Good communication skills;
3. Minimum Information Technology skills – email, Word, Excel;
4. Proven cross-cultural adjustments;
5. Ability to fight spiritual warfare, but avoid over-emphasizing or under-emphasizing this reality;
6. Healthy – psychologically and medically (need culturally appropriate psychological assessment and medical, dental and optical assessments);
7. Interdenominational in doctrine and practice.
For the time being, SIM Australia has arranged with a Bible college in Australia for candidates to attend a TESOL course and to do their practical work there. The Bible college will also make sure that their English skills are good and that their computer skills are further developed. This would prove unnecessary if Melanesians with more exposure to formal education applied for service.

Preparing Melanesians for Missions

We can learn several things about Melanesian culture – and preparing Melanesians for missions – from the above discussion. Framing our discussion within cultural-descriptive terms such as high vs. low context, polychronic vs. monochromic, collectivism vs. individualism, and high vs. low power distance will shed light on the challenges Melanesians face as missionaries.

Recently, I heard of specific challenges that Melanesian missionaries face when serving on multi-cultural teams on the mission field. The following discussion often relates to preparing Melanesians to operate effectively within a multi-cultural team environment, a field practice increasingly followed by mission organizations today.

High-Context Culture

In SIM discussions of challenges to overcome, we saw that Melanesians favour personal, verbal, and indirect communication. This places them firmly within the high-context communication category. According to Edward T. Hall, “A high-context (HC) communication or message is one in which most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message” (1989: 91). Knowing this is significant in several ways.
**High-Context Based Training.** Effective training for missions for Melanesians would be one that uses high-context communication. This suggests verbal- and activity-based training utilizing case studies that involve role-playing. Kenneth Cushner mentions a distinction that some scholars make between “field-independent” and “field-dependent” learners, with the former characterized by “parts-specific,” linear, factual learning and the latter by “big picture,” relational, personally-relevant learning (1994:121). I would classify Melanesians as field-dependent learners, reinforcing the need for high-context based training.

Furthermore, Jon Paschke emphasizes the importance of training Melanesians in small groups. He refers to seminal research by Earle and Dorothy Bowen on learning style preferences among African students. “The Bowens have noted that East and West African students typically demonstrate ‘field-sensitive’ characteristics, remarkably similar to observations of students from other non-western countries in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Oceania” (2004: 60). Paschke notes nine such “field characteristics,” including the realities that Melanesians relate well interpersonally, enjoy being with people, and value social acceptance over autonomy (2004: 61).

**Communication / English Training.** Prospective Melanesian missionaries need training in communicating with low-context co-workers and within low-context organizations. In mission agencies that are multi-culturally team-oriented, Melanesian missionaries may often team with missionaries from low-context cultures on the mission field. This suggests specific training on communication principles, but training that builds upon the high vs. low context communication model.⁵

It is also necessary for Melanesians to acquire solid English skills in order to operate within the global environment that exists today. Whether it is travelling internationally, or communicating within a multi-cultural mission organization, English is often the language of choice.⁶ On a related note, one of the challenges facing Melanesian missionaries is the lack of skills needed to obtain visas in many countries. This is due in part to limited access to professional training in the countries of Melanesia. One common solution for obtaining visas is entering a country as an English teacher. The Christian Leaders’ Training College could offer TESOL training towards an internationally recognized certificate. Securing qualified TESOL teachers to provide the training remains the biggest obstacle.
Technology Training. Most mission organizations are driven by technology for communication and are consequently low-context operations. Technology training is therefore imperative since Melanesian missionaries must operate competently within mission agencies in today’s technology-driven environment. They need to understand the nuances of doing low-context communication despite coming from a high-context culture. Necessary technology training includes word processing, spreadsheet, e-mail, and internet. One should not overlook specific training on e-mail and social networking etiquette either.

Polychronic Culture

SIM also noted that Melanesians are relational and event oriented rather than activity and clock-oriented. This falls squarely within Hall’s definition of polychronic: “High-context people also tend to be polychronic; that is, they are apt to be involved in a lot of different activities with several different people at any given time” (1989: 150). “Furthermore,” Hall states, “polychronic cultures often place completion of the job in a special category much below the importance of being nice, courteous, considerate, kind, and sociable to other human beings” (1989: 150). There are several implications of this for training Melanesians for missions.

Cultural Training. When serving cross-culturally it is imperative that missionaries understand the cultural blinders they wear. This is no less true for Melanesians serving in cultures which differ from their own. “Without culture-sensitive knowledge,” according to Stella Ting-Toomey and John G. Oetzel, “disputants cannot learn to uncover the implicit ethnocentric lenses they use to evaluate behaviors in an intercultural conflict situation” (2001: 174, italics in the original). There are at least two coordinate ways to provide culture training. Providing formal cultural anthropology training exposes students to characteristics of differing cultures. The second option is to expose students to cross-cultural internships during their training. In our own efforts in this regard we are considering having students do their cross-cultural internship in eastern Indonesia, primarily for economic reasons. Such an internship would give them the opportunity to learn more about Islam and, at the same time, expose them to an Asian culture other than their own.
**Interpersonal Relationship Training.** It is important for prospective missionaries to understand themselves. This is often accomplished through psychological testing, which, unfortunately, is often designed by and geared for populations in the West. In spite of the cultural bias in many of these tools, learning to decipher and relate to others based on their psychological and cultural make-up is imperative to the successful operation of a multicultural team. Training that increases Melanesians’ self-awareness and awareness of others “plants seeds” which will hopefully bear fruit through more healthy relationships throughout the missionaries’ ministries.

**Leadership Training.** It is important for Melanesias to better understand various leadership models as they relate to persons from diverse cultures. A polychronic leader views success as maintaining human relationships. A monochronic leader, by contrast, views success as the accomplishment of tasks. This can create team tension on the mission field if leadership goals are misunderstood. The concept of “power distance” has been a useful interpretive framework in this regard. James E. Plueddemann explains:

Some cultures assume a large status gap between those who have power and those who don’t. In these cultures, both leaders and followers assume that the power gap is natural and good. These societies are called high-power-distance cultures. Other cultures value lesser power distance and seek to minimize status symbols and inequalities between people. These are called low-power-distance cultures. All cultures fit along a power-distance continuum (2009:93).

The Melanesian culture falls in the middle spectrum of the power distance continuum, a mid-power distance culture (Kavanamur and Esonu 2011:115). The two Melanesian leadership practices of big-men and chiefs favour a high-power distance classification, while the collective Melanesian culture (as discussed below) favours a low-power distance culture.

Remember also that one of the challenges to overcome was the Melanesian tendency to be compliant and reactive in hierarchical structures. Such a challenge can be mitigated by understanding leadership structures and their relationship to culture. In many ways then, training in leadership – from both time and power perspectives – would minimize potential problems on the mission field.
Collectivist Culture

Melanesians are quite community and relationally oriented rather than being individualistic and standoffish. This characteristic lends itself to relational evangelism, especially when combined with Melanesians’ deep concern for the lost. Negatively, the high value Melanesians place on allegiance can be detrimental when working on teams. Therefore, Melanesians’ relational focus is both a benefit and a challenge, which should not surprise us if we understand the comparison of individualist vs. collectivist cultures. David A. Livermore describes a collectivist culture, which typifies Melanesian culture,

In these places, people view themselves less autonomously and more as members of groups. They’re concerned about the effects of actions upon the group as a whole, and decisions are made by consensus rather than individualistically. This isn’t to say people living in collectivist cultures are purely unselfish. Rather they’re programmed to think about the goals and needs of the groups of which they’re a part rather than to consider their own individual needs first (2006:122).

One of the challenges noted earlier was that if Melanesians feel offended by an e-mail communication, they would not answer e-mails. Because Melanesian culture is a collectivist culture, this should not surprise us. Collectivist cultures are built around human relations; therefore, when relationships are broken people are “much more vulnerable to anger” (Hall, 1989:150). This example and others presented earlier, show that the ramifications of training for missions within a collectivist culture are significant. For example, Neal R. Goodman notes “societies that are strong on Collectivism,” prefer group work when given assignments (1994:138).

Teamwork Training. Understanding group dynamics is foundational to teamwork (Ting-Toomey and Oetzal 2001:132-135). Appreciating individual personalities, cultural backgrounds, the purpose of the team, and individual roles in the team are all vital to making a team successful (Hooker 2008:4-6). The training should include formal study of group dynamics, combined with mimicking real-life cross-cultural
situations through case studies and role-playing. Intercultural conflict often begins with different cultural expectations (Ting-Toomey and Oetzal 2001:1). The case studies should include high context and low context, polychronic and monochronic, and collectivist and individualist players. In addition, training in truths such the unity of the body of Christ, including reconciliation among members, is vital (Lundy 1999:152).

Spiritual Warfare Training. In addition to things that are visible in this world, an important part of the collectivist culture in Melanesia includes things that cannot be seen. Relating appropriately to both visible and non-visible entities is significant in Melanesian traditional beliefs. A Melanesian Christian needs to be prepared to deal with the spirit world, both from a theological and practical perspective. Comprehensive training in world religions must include both formal doctrine of the world religions and associated folk religion practices, since folk religions often emphasize the spirit world.

Conclusion

The training recommendations above grew directly out of the challenges that Melanesians face on the mission field. In addition to the areas discussed in this paper one ought not overlook other standard training relevant to missions such as theology of mission, history of mission, and other areas. However, the purpose of this paper was to highlight the training needs that are specific to Melanesians, training that should not be overlooked before Melanesians go to the field. We classified Melanesian culture as high-context, polychronic, mid-power distance, and collectivist, finding that Melanesians have cultural strengths to applaud and cultural challenges to overcome on the mission field.

One of the emphases in this paper was training Melanesians to work in multi-cultural teams on the mission field. With that emphasis in mind, it should not surprise us that much of the proposed training involved practical life-skills, including communication, English, interpersonal relationships, teamwork, and leadership. The remaining proposed training – cultural, TESOL, and spiritual warfare – are less surprising since we might find them in missions training programs in the West. Most surprising to me, though, was the importance of technology training. As a missionary
from the West who has been the recipient of formal educational systems that prize such training, it is second nature to use technology. Training Melanesians, however, requires attention to such topics which may not be as necessary in the West.

Historically, the mission education we have offered to our students at the Christian Leaders’ Training College has focused on the importance of “going” to the mission field. We have sought to convince students and churches in Melanesia that they needed to play an increasingly prominent role in worldwide missions. However, based on the above feedback from SIM Australia, we now need to focus on the “doing” of the mission field. Our training needs to include practical skills necessary for working on multi-cultural teams which operate within the influences of globalization. In conclusion, let each of us be wise in our mission education efforts, no matter what culture we come from, or in what culture we teach!
Notes

1. Irian Jaya, although part of the nation of Indonesia, is also considered part of Melanesia. Irian Jaya occupies the western half of the island of New Guinea, while the nation of Papua New Guinea occupies the eastern half.


3. In addition to the insightful information provided by David Hammer of SIM Australia, I also appreciated comments on drafts of this paper by Tema Manko, Director of PNG World Mission (an indigenous missions agency), George Mombi of the Christian Leaders’ Training College, and Patrick Hall, also of the Christian Leaders’ Training College.

4. Low-context communication, generally speaking, occurs in nations that have European roots, including Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United States, and much of Europe. High-context communication is often prevalent in the rest of the world. See John N. Hooker (2008), “Cultural Differences in Business Communication,” Carnegie Mellon University, Tepper School of Business, Paper 152:2. <http://repository/cmu.edu/tepper/152>.


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