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Today's missionaries in training expect their future experience to reflect and develop their gifts and skills, and to produce personal growth

In this section I plan to look at the ways that potential missionaries expect their future service to develop their skills and gifts and to widen their experience, so that they can grow in personal effectiveness. I also want to determine whether they expect to develop professionally and if so how strong that expectation is. Are they expecting not just to be better people but also more employable when they return from the mission field? Furthermore, I want to explore the questions that these issues raise for mission agencies. What, for example, about the need for ongoing training? Does the agency have a responsibility (whether this is understood by missionary personnel or not) to ensure, not simply that people on the job are given the chance to use their gifts and skills, but also to develop them? Can we now see missionary service as part of a 'career path'.

As a preliminary response to these questions I contend that the questions themselves demand a considerable re-think on the part of our agencies (including the training agencies). In the past we have not thought about missionary service as a 'career', indeed we have often treated the idea as suspicious. (I will look at this again when we come to conclusions.) But one recent trend at least will force us to think through this issue more carefully. We are training and sending out today a host of what we might call, 'hybrid' Christian workers. These are 'tentmakers', people involved in 'business as mission', professionals with development agencies and the like. For these a 'career path' is by no means an irrelevance. They need to hang on to the idea of developing *professional* skills as part of their calling to an effective ministry. For them this is not a matter of vague aspiration, but urgent necessity.

The results of the questionnaire issued give us some idea of how a group of students, training for mission, saw their future 'careers', though it has to be admitted that it would have taken a larger and more representative sample, together with more specific questions (e.g. about the *sort* of ministry that respondents are hoping to go into) to answer all the questions posed in our opening paragraph.

Here are the results in brief:

- There was some concern that gifts would not be fully utilised in the future (over half of the respondents expressed this anxiety) but considerable confidence was expressed by the respondents that the sending agencies could find suitable roles for them.
- Most were confident that they had a 'flexible and creative' approach to the future. This confidence was expressed particularly in the context of their role when actually involved in missionary service. I think that this implies that some *development* of role would be expected and welcomed.
- At a more specific level a significant majority would be prepared to work part time (i.e. at a 'secular' occupation) if they were required to do so. This was linked to the issue of funding. This adds to the impression of a flexible approach, but gives less clear signals about seeing missionary service as a 'career'.

- A large percentage of respondents thought it likely that they would be able to *develop* (i.e. not just use) their skills and 'skills' here seems to be referring to vocational skills specifically.

I found these results genuinely encouraging. The respondents put a high value on flexibility, and in most cases this went as far as being willing to take non-traditional pathways such as 'keeping going' with a part time job if circumstances demanded it. They were also confident that once they had selected the right mission agency (they felt they needed to do this rather than vice versa!) they would be reasonably well looked after in terms of being matched to the right service opportunities. On the other hand they had a healthy desire that their gifts would be used and developed. Whether the answers reveal specific thinking about 'career pathways', I doubt. My guess is that students in training know that they should maintain and even enhance their professional skills while in active service, but it is not something they are thinking about very deeply while they are preparing to set out. Actively demanding opportunities for professional advancement may come later.

Overall it was also encouraging that there seemed to be what might be called an 'holistic' approach to mission service. 'I will get out there into the action and do what needs to be done to be effective' was the idea. It was not felt necessary to define the activity too closely as 'missionary work' or something else. This links with answers on the questionnaire (dealt with elsewhere) that suggest that current candidates have a sense of call to mission as a life-long life-style rather than to a specific task or place. While this 'flexible and creative' approach (see above) is admirable, there are obviously dangers as well. Does it turn the missionaries into 'amateurs' when, in fact they have valuable and specific skills and training which, unless there are very strong indications to the contrary, they should be using? Are they open to exploitation by agencies who want to use them for their programmes without due consideration of the needs of the individual? Are missionaries with professional qualifications aware that they may be falling behind their peers 'at home' so that they might find it difficult, or even impossible, to find suitable employment when they return?

In this respect, I would like the respondents to have higher expectations. Or perhaps a better word is 'wider'. There is no need for them to feel that joining a mission agency means necessarily discarding years of training and proven skills based on recognised gifts. What the call to mission gives, we hope, is a new focus whereby this training and these gifts and skills can be re-focussed on a new area of need. Of course, this re-focussing may in itself involve fresh training – in theological explanation, cultural understanding communication theory and other disciplines – but this will be in addition to, and not instead of, what the candidate already possesses. (Hence the word 'wider'.) I am not really happy about the concept of discarding *anything*, certainly not at the training stage. How do we know what opportunities may arise?

I wonder also whether training agencies have taken the needed width of legitimate expectations into consideration. There is considerable demand at the moment for courses on 'business as mission' or ones which have 'tentmaking' as part of the content. Similarly, Development Studies is increasingly popular as a subject, perhaps because it has the feel of preparing people to be missionaries and yet missionaries with an identifiable 'career'. As we have seen, answers to the questionnaire suggest that many students are simply abandoning the old-style missionary profile which might be characterised as a long-term evangelist or church-planter, working overseas in a 'foreign' culture with an identifiable mission agency, fully supported by the gifts of God's people. (Alternatively, all of the above, but a medical professional or teacher – agriculturists and engineers are also sometimes admitted to the club – working in a missionary run hospital, school etc.) Obviously, I am stereotyping here, but that is the point. Yet, as we have seen, this profile does not by any means fulfil the expectations of those going into mission today. The bullet points above suggest something

quite different. Training agencies need to make the adjustment. How can they equip prospective missionaries who, though deeply committed to mission, have a much less focussed idea of the task ahead? The same sort of question needs to be asked by mission agencies. How do we get *these people* into the action and support them in it?

Mission agencies also need to take another look at the issue of professional development. Let us assume that many young people are indeed going into mission today as tentmakers, or as business people or as development experts and of course are expecting to use their professional skills in their work. Do they not need, in a good sense, to see this as a career with all the usual expectations that go with a career – widening experience, on-the-job training, increasing responsibility, opportunities to confer with people in the same field, study leaves, sabbaticals, financial capital to develop new initiatives and so on. Have we really sorted this out? Or does it all still come under the heading ‘pastoral care’ with the promise of prayer and an occasional visit from a sympathetic senior missionary. (Again, this is a deliberate stereotype.) I was touched that one of the answers on the questionnaire suggested that the prospective missionaries have considerable confidence that mission agencies will look after them in matching their gifts and skills to the appropriate opportunities. I hope they are right. I sense a residual suspicion among mission leaders about any idea that people need to develop their professional skills, or ‘deserve’ better working conditions, or indeed are owed anything that will enable them to ‘get on’ in life.

In conclusion, I would like to make a couple of recommendations, one of them a ‘bee-in-my-bonnet’ no doubt very familiar to those who know me. Much of our training in mission has followed the pattern of theological training. Theological training has as its attendant disciplines subjects such as philosophy, religions, history, linguistics, and ethics. Mission training has the same allies, only (all being well) an additional component of cross cultural studies, the basic academic discipline in this case being anthropology. My question is: what about sociology, politics, economics, business, leadership, postcolonialism, global studies and perhaps some others? Mission workers, we are assured, are expecting to go out into situations where they will be working outside the Christian or mission sub-culture – setting up a business in Jordan, perhaps, or advising an agricultural programme in Kirghizstan. Are we preparing them for *that*? Can we send them to *that* and support them in *that*? My recommendation is a very simple one. We must be more people centred. We must ask, as realistically as we can, what sort of work are our future missionaries likely to be involved in, and how can we prepare them for it? It sounds easy enough, but in my experience, these are questions not asked sufficiently often.

My second recommendation may seem contradictory to what I have just said. It is that we all need to relax a little. The truth is that, as the textual scholars say, ‘the critical hermeneutical principle is the context’ and we never know what that context might be. We need to go on encouraging our expectant missionaries to be always setting out, but in the understanding that they will never arrive. In this respect, as I have said, the questionnaire results are encouraging. But we all need to accept this. God has already given these people gifts and abilities, and as long as we don’t get in the way, he will find ways to use them. The appropriate response to new situations is simply to be ‘flexible and creative’. How we get to our goals is in any case much less important than who we become in getting there. Growth is good but it will happen ‘naturally’, that is to say in God’s way, as long as we allow it to do so.

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