

Wholly Available? Flexibility and service



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'Here I am, wholly available! As for me, I will serve the Lord.' (Bowater, 1981) So we sing, sometimes sincerely, sometimes almost glibly – but the results of this survey make me wonder whether in reality, the prospective missionary sings such words with some underlying pre-suppositions ... Is the missionary-in training 'wholly available' or is it their gifts, experience and skills which are available for use? 'Here I am – as a trained linguist... as a teacher ... as one who has a heart for the poor, as a builder, as a trained and experienced youth worker ... of course, Lord, you understand that's the way in which I am available. That's who I am and those are the gifts you have given me.'" And in case it seems that I am maligning our students – where does such a concept come from? I fear many of us who have been involved in mission for several years may be to blame!

The skills, experiences and giftedness of the new worker can cause the mission agencies to make certain assumptions and to have specific expectations of them

I was at missionary training college with a student who was trained as both a nurse and a teacher. Her strong desire was to be involved in teaching and discipleship – but her fear was that the needs in the mission hospital would mean that the mission agency would place her as a nurse there. In former days, under the more traditional and hierarchically-structured mission agencies, this could be a genuine concern. However, I wonder if we have now swung to on opposite extreme. Could it be that Ted Ward's words, written 7 years ago, are still all too true: 'In selecting missionaries, agencies have shifted from literal biblical criteria to measurable competencies.' (IBMR October 1999) Granted, such a comment raises many more questions which cannot be dealt with here, but the thrust is clear. Agencies seem to look for certain skills and competencies. The corollary to this then surely is that potential new recruits feel this is what they need to demonstrate and to offer.

A little more than 50% of respondents were 'somewhat confident' that the organisations would choose their role according to who they were and not just what the organisation needed. Only 29% felt that was certainly true, leaving a worryingly large minority (14%) who felt it would not be true. Is this a legitimate concern on the part of the prospective missionary? Where does such a concern originate? Is it based on stories of by-gone missionary ages when the expectation was that you accepted meekly whatever assignment was given you, whether you felt it 'fitted' you or not? Is it based on stories heard from other missionaries? Or is it the result of previous experience in the ever-changing work-place? Whatever the reason for the perception (fear?), this is a matter which should cause concern amongst sending agencies. Do we convey the sense that we see the gaps and then seek to 'plug' them with suitably skilled workers, irrespective of other considerations? Further, are we taking on board the increasing desire on the part of new workers coming to the field to have the opportunity for more 'on-the-job' training? (This is a subject dealt with elsewhere.)

Other missionaries make assumptions and have certain expectations based on their colleagues' skills, experiences and giftedness

How easy it is to put our colleagues into a box, based on what we see as their particular skills! In my role as a lay-trainer in one country I obviously had to use my teaching skills, but when I moved to another country and my main ministry became teaching I was never asked,

and it was never considered that I might also have skills or experience in other areas as well! I was placed in the 'teacher' box, and there I had to stay!

Yet I also have been guilty in my assumptions about others! We desperately needed a trained English teacher in the British programme I was heading up in a school for missionaries children. I remember feeling very annoyed when a missionary colleague, a trained English teacher but whose ministry involved church planting and lay-training, said to me most emphatically 'Teaching in the MK school is something I will not do'. 'Is that fair?' I thought, 'with the skills he has'? I looked at our 'gap' saw his skills – and wanted to 'plug' him in!

For our students, commitment to a particular role is seen as important as a commitment to an organisation (for 38% somewhat true, for 48% certainly true). This conclusion may not sit well with the older long-established missionary for whom the organisation has assumed a far greater importance, for whom the greater 'good' is to fit into the over-all thrust of the ministry and for whom individual roles may not seem to be so important.

The prospective missionary makes assumptions and has certain expectations based on their skills, experience and giftedness

It is encouraging to note (but should not come as a surprise) that students at a college for cross-cultural mission training overwhelmingly feel called to the concept and life-style of mission (98%). But what does that concept look like?

There is a correlation between the 61% who expressed some level of concern that they will not have the opportunity to use their gifts fully and the 69% who, when thinking of their call and role, stated that it was somewhat or certainly true to say that they were concerned that their skills, gifts and experiences will not be used enough. Is it being over-dramatic to ask: Is the potential new worker merely looking for a group or agency which can use their gifts? In certain cases it can be that the ethos of the agency itself, or even the areas of the world in which it works are felt to be less important than the need to find a niche for the skills offered. Mission agencies may need to be more aware that the new candidate is approaching them with this mind-set.

An overwhelming 97% of those surveyed said that their general approach to the future is flexible and creative.¹ But this in itself raises a question. Where will that flexibility be when agencies and / or other colleagues want to put them in another role? Within traditional mission organisations how will such a person 'fit', where (rigid?) structures are in place, decision-making can seem to be a long-drawn out process, and where a less-well informed 'home-side' may be making decisions concerning field situations which they are not able fully to understand? Sometimes the opportunities on the field are not as the home-side has understood and represented it. So the missionary finds ministries in line with his gifts which are fulfilling and helpful to others, only to be told that these are not in line with the home-side goals and strategy for the field. What about the situation where the worker feels called and is accepted to fulfil a certain role, and then finds that the field has changed its ministry focus and their role no longer clearly 'fits'?

As well as having to cope with the apparent inflexibilities of mission structure, what happens when the new worker's flexibility and creativity faces the limitations imposed by governments, or by the colleague who finds new ideas and creativity threatening?

¹ This came under the heading of 'Call and role' so one assumes they are thinking in terms of mission – but could it be to 'life' in general?)

Year after year, here at Redcliffe when we have carried out a poll of the class as to which attribute they consider the most to be desired in missionaries, the answer that always tops the list is 'Flexibility'. The students seem to understand that this will be required of them – but how willing are they to 'go with the flow' of organisations and colleagues who may seem, to them, to want to stifle that very flexibility and creativity (of which they are so proud) in the carrying out of their ministry? Is there an inflexibility in the desire to be flexible?! Is the potential new worker demanding a flexibility from others (fellow-missionaries and their agencies) which cannot be offered?

It should also be noted that 79% of respondents expressed some level of concern that they might prove inadequate in terms of their necessary skills (though for just over 20% this was not a concern at all.) Are some of our 'missionaries in training' concerned that they will be placed in situations without the necessary skills? Is this a lack of self-confidence or is this too based on past experiences in the secular or even Christian world? Whatever the reasoning, it seems clear that new workers come with considerable fears that they might prove to be inadequate. This may be why often they want to have a firm job-description before they can agree to 'sign up' to the agency's designation for them. (This is particularly true of certain personalities.) Increasingly, too, sending churches seem these days to be demanding this kind of specificity from the organisation before they will agree to their member going out. Could it be that a justifiable desire for accountability on the part of their member results in a rigidity of expectation which can create difficulties for all concerned - the senders (be it an agency or the church), the receivers and the one sent?

A further question is 'How flexible is the missionary in training right now? In my role as Director of Placements I am encouraged by the willingness of the majority of students to serve and to move out of their comfort zone in their placements. Yet there will always be some who will say 'I cannot do that' / 'I don't want to do this'. This may well be because of a realistic assessment of their own capabilities – or is it in fact an indication of an unwillingness to be flexible?

Reflection

Trawling through the results of the questionnaire, I do find a glaring omission. I have no doubt that the notions of 'service' / 'the willingness to serve' are assumed in this questionnaire, as a driving force behind much mission work. But with the frequent stress on skills and giftedness, have we fallen into the trap of thinking that the possession of these alone is what makes us effective missionaries? Are we all somewhat to blame for this mind-set?

- Agencies offer specific openings which demand certain skills... e.g. "Needed: someone able to teach handicapped children." Can it be assumed that the skills acquired in the sending country by the new worker will automatically be transferable to another culture? Might the new worker need to go rather with a willingness to learn, maybe even to be 'deskilled' in order to learn fresh skills?
- The prospective missionary feels he or she needs to offer a particular skill before the agency will consider them. But how does one define unquantifiable skills such as the ability to come alongside others to help and support with compassion and empathy? Is it not true that the 'receivers' are not wanting our skills so much as 'us' – those who can walk with them, who can come alongside in a spirit of service and a continued willingness to learn rather than coming as a ready made product to be used?

Are we merely following the ethos of our consumer society with our emphasis on skills, gifts and experience? Prospective missionaries could be in danger of becoming like consumers, trying to find the 'best fit' on their own terms ...Or is it in fact the other way round, that the mission agencies themselves are looking for 'the best fit' for their work – so the candidate tailor-makes himself accordingly? These may be chicken-and-egg questions, but none the less they should give us pause for reflection and to re-evaluate our emphasis, both as those involved in mobilising and sending as well as those who are preparing to go.

After all those questions and challenges let me finish with a recent encouragement on this issue. It was a reflection from one of our Redcliffe students who demonstrates how placements are an important part of helping students find out about themselves, and how they fit into the 'big picture' of mission. This student went to work with a small church in France...

“Something I hadn't really considered before is that I had often thought of mission as going somewhere to bring my gifts and knowledge to help people and churches in need...It is so easy to see myself as the important one, and to forget that the aim is to bring the people I am working with to a point where they don't need me any more. My ultimate aim should be to help the churches to grow and become strong and stable enough to support themselves; to survive and thrive without the support of missionaries.”

Now there's a challenge for us all!

Bibliography

Ward, Ted *Repositioning Mission Agencies for the Twenty-first Century* International Bulletin of Missionary Research, October 1999

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