

COLLEGE AND CHURCH BASED TRAINING -- COMPLIMENTARY OR MUTUALLY DEFEATING?

Discussion Starter Paper: *(For the International Brethren Training Consultation at Emmaus Bible College, Iowa, USA. June 2005. Prepared by Mark Davies, presently Practical Studies Coordinator at Tilsley College Motherwell, previously missionary in NE Zambia mdavies@glo-europe.org)*

Some definitions of Training Systems and Institutions

While most present at this consultation serve as staff of Bible training institutions, it goes without saying that we recognise training from a Biblical perspective to embrace a wide range of activities, of which Bible colleges are only a part. Secondly we are representing training facilities that serve within the Brethren Movement or at least have strong connections with the Brethren worldwide. Again, it goes without saying, that deep within our psyche (hopefully!) there is the concept that the local church can and should be the most significant training ground for every believer. The fact that sadly our local churches fail to live up to New Testament standards, should not have eliminated within us the desire to see every believer disciplined and trained for Christ within a local church context.

So it is valuable for a while to reflect on what is the present range of training systems and Institutions within the Brethren Movement (or closely allied and easily accessible to it) and how they relate to New Testament expectations. From there we can ask questions and discuss issues detailed below

1) Home-Based Training (Personal Study Courses)

a) Basic Discipleship

- i) Specialised personal Courses e.g. Emmaus,
- ii) General Christian Books e.g. Purpose Drive life

b) In depth Study

- i) Non-Accredited Study courses e.g. Emmaus
- ii) Accredited Study Courses e.g. Distance Learning courses from Institutions
- iii) Attending specialised short courses and seminars (typically run by Institutions)

2) Church Based Training Systems

- a) **Church-based Bible Schools:** This is where a group of Bible teachers in an area or the church leadership run a class for a prolonged period to systematic teach believers how to handle the Bible, to engage with current issues in theology and in society, and to train them in the practicalities of church ministry.
- b) **Church-based Seminars:** This is where leadership organise short periods (e.g. weekend) of specialised training, either using their own skilled people or bringing in specialist trainers from else where. It is not as rigorous as a Church based school but over a few years should cover all the key areas of ministry development for their membership. E.g. Learning to Lead course (GLO)
- c) **General Congregational training:** This refers to what is considered the normal basic work of a local church, (in Brethren churches anyway I hope!), and would include a weekly Bible teaching meeting, a weekly Bible study and prayer time, strategic pastoral care (preventative as well as crisis management) and occasional “ministry meetings” – Bible teaching conferences.
 - The **GOAL** here is surely that every local church member should be adequately trained to use the gifts they each have effectively for the sake of the Kingdom of God.
 - The **critical challenge** is as to whether in percentage terms we are even marginally meeting this goal. In your local congregation what percentage of believers have had any specific training to adequately perform the work assigned to them?

3) Institution Based Training

a) Vocational Bible Training Institutions

E.g. Tilsley College, Geneva Bible College, GLO Zambia.

This we are defining as Bible Colleges whose ethos is more towards the training for service than the more academic ethos. It is a fine difference as many of these institutions do have a good academic thrust as well and some run accredited courses that link into further theological studies. It is also accepted that Degree awarding colleges do also have a thrust of preparing people for service, but there is a difference between these two types of Institutions.

b) Degree awarding Bible Training Institution

E.g. Emmaus Seminary, Morelands Bible College.

Here we are defining Colleges, seminaries and Universities where the ethos is biased towards academic progress in the study of theology. Such Institutions offer fully accredited diplomas and various levels of degrees.

c) Combined Bible & Life Skills Institutions – “Christian” Education

These are institutions which make a deliberate step to combine Biblical/theological studies with skills training in a variety of other things leading to qualifications to be employed anywhere in the general job market place. It ranges from Vocational Institution level such as ZACTS in Zambia which offers a two year diploma in combined theology with an Agricultural Diploma, Craft Certified in carpentry or car mechanics, to Degree awarding institutions such as Christian seminaries/Universities that award degrees in General Education, engineering, Anthropology etc. It should be recognised that there is a bridge here from the world of “theological education” to “Christian Education”. Both historically in missions and contemporarily in many of our countries, there is a significant move for churches or church based groups to run educational institutions. These range from pre-schools and nurseries, through primary and secondary schools right up to degree awarding universities. The ethos of this could be argued as coming from the Mosaic Law commands to educate your children in the ways of the Lord and the synagogue schools concepts that emerged in Judaism post-exile. It is beyond the scope of this conference to discuss the obvious value and role of such educational institutions. We should note however that there is a cross over and hence this category (c) of Bible Institutions that lay as much emphasis on non-Bible based training as on theological training, preparing their students to be active servants of God in “secular” employment or using “secular” jobs to support themselves as they minister with local churches.

- In terms of church needs, there are far too few students studying in these more vocational Bible training Institutes. For many students doing a degree in theology is not what they actually need, but a shorter course with a more direct entry into local church ministry.
- Are there too many doing a full degree who will make little or limited use of their theological studies in their ministry in a local church?
- It is interesting that many of the present category (b) Degree awarding Institutions started life essentially as Vocational Bible Institutions. Some of the factors leading to their change of category may include the academic requirements followed in the push for seeking accreditation.
- In most developing world situations, “tent” making is the main way of support for church workers. There is therefore a challenge to our Institutions who are training in or for these regions to incorporate a greater amount of non-Bible skills training into the theological course.

4) Advance theological Training

Whether carried out at an Institution or in personal research (though inevitably linked to an institution), this refers to post-first degree studies leading to Masters and Doctorate level recognition.

While it is recognised that the number achieving this will be small, the need for a group of highly developed theological thinkers in each generation is key to the overall leadership and direction of the church in any society. Past examples of FF Bruce and present thinkers like David Gooding serve to challenge us with the question: Are we sure that we are still producing theologians of influence from within the Brethren movement?

There is often a high “leakage” of some of the best students from the Brethren into the Church at large, especially if their advanced studies are in non-Brethren institutions, leading to positions of leadership in other church groups or Institutions. What can be done to give vital and valid occupation to our best “Thinkers” keeping them essentially within the Brethren Movement?

Discussion Starters

1. Are we adequately running and resourcing all necessary aspects of training? Or are there significant gaps? If so, how can we address the outstanding need areas?
2. Is what we are currently running in terms of our Institutions, truly and vitally attached to our local churches? In what way are we accountable to our local churches and honestly serving their needs?
3. Is there any Biblical precedent for a Bible training system/institution to be independent of the Church? How should our vision, programmes and emphasis relate to our churches?
4. What are the actual relationships between current Bible Institutional leadership and local church leadership?