

TRAINING IN AFRICA BOTH IN AND FOR A “RURAL” CONTEXT

(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)

INTRODUCTION

I would resound a loud ‘Amen’ to Felix’s comments on the need for African leaders who are deeply conversant with the Scriptures and with all the relevant theological, philosophical and technological areas of debate that impact both Africa and indeed the rest of the world. We must support key individuals, who are recognised by God and the church as having such a calling and potential, to be trained to the highest academic level. However the particular concern of my part of this paper is for the training of ‘Grass roots leadership’, as referred to in Felix’s part of the paper, which is where my experience lies, working primarily in rural areas of Zambia.

Who is the church trying to train here and what specific problems may be faced when doing so?

Defining “Rural”

Traditionally people refer to “Rural Africa” intending to contrast it I suppose with Urban Africa, although I suspect that in many minds the whole of Africa is rural and “classified” therefore as being a wee bit behind and less “educated”. Such thinking rather betrays the less “educated” status of the said thinker. Africa takes its rightful place among the best in all walks of life, and currently speaking especially in terms of spiritual leadership. So to delineate the training needs for rural type communities in Africa we must briefly describe the characteristics of what we may mean by “Rural.”

Some Sociological guidelines: In terms of the living situation of people;-

- a) Only a minority of people would be in formal employment.
- b) The majority would be subsisting on agriculture, fishing or some form of manual trade.
- c) There would be medium to high levels of poverty in material terms.
- d) Daily life is carried out in a mother language which would not be the official language of the country (which in Africa would be English, French, Arabic, Portuguese, Swahili and Spanish). Swahili would be the one exception to this in some cases.
- e) Many would have not completed Primary school, some would have completed secondary school, very few would have a college education (the exceptions may include those in the retirement bracket, some of whom may have PhD’s!)
- f) In terms of life skills, the majority would have learned what they need to do mostly by modelling and not by the class room. Learning by observing and copying their seniors in that activity.

Even a basic knowledge of Africa should tell you that what I have described doesn’t just refer to rural as in non-urban areas, but describes a significant proportion of African people, whether they live in non-urban areas, peri-urban or for that matter city centre. However the city is a huge attraction, and churches found in and around cities are blessed with a reasonable number of trained leaders. By contrast the rural areas are unattractive to the educated for the obvious reasons of lack of modern facilities (electricity, telephones, internet) and there is a corresponding lack there of college educated church leaders. Sitting as many of us do in the comfort zone of westernised civilisations, it is not for us to even dream of pointing the finger and asking why more college trained church leaders don’t move out to the rural provinces. Some do out of conviction and a deep sense of calling, praise God, and are absolutely key to the growth and development of the churches there.

Some Psychological guidelines: Another helpful way of understanding students in a “rural” context in Africa is to consider learning styles. E & D Bowen write that research and analysis of cognitive styles applied to anthropologically diverse contexts imply that certain people are more ‘field sensitive’ in their innate learning habits. To be ‘field-sensitive’ in this context means to learn more by interaction with one’s environment (socially as well as situationally). This is as opposed to others defined as ‘field-independent’ who tend to learn more by inward analysis. The Rural contexts for training that we are concerned with would in my judgement significantly match the field-sensitive criteria, which E&D Bowen¹ define as;-

- Very sensitive to the judgements of others
- Responsive to social reinforcement
- Good with interpersonal relationships, which are very important.

¹ P 206-213 *Internationalising Missionary Training*

- Likes being with people, groups very important.
- Obedience to authority important.
- Culturally determined gender roles important
- Not analytical at problem solving
- Extrinsic motivation very important
- Autonomy not as important as social acceptance.

From this they draw up a 20 point teaching strategy for training facilities and systems in Two-Thirds world countries. Their list covers down to very practical matters, too detailed for us to cover in this paper, but their list should be essential reading for anyone developing courses in many 'rural' cultural contexts.

What I will do however is to quantify issues I have had to grapple with while participating in developing relevant training facilities in rural areas, that will not only effectively train but also **retain** those trained to work in their home areas.

SPECIFIC CONSTRAINTS IN ORGANISING TRAINING SYSTEMS FOR "RURAL" CONTEXTS

Another session in this consultation is looking at the interface between college-based and church-based theological training, so I won't comment on that debate here. Suffice to say that all of what I am saying in this paper covers both types of approaches in rural contexts, whether a Bible school running up to 1-2 year programmes or systematic church based training schemes.

A. Biblical Considerations

1. Biblical and Ecclesiastical based studies as opposed to Theological based studies.

Students need to be prepared to be the key readers and interpreters of the Bible in their rural community where literacy rates may be under 50%. As such they may become the sole authority on what the Bible actually says, what God requires to happen or not happen in a believer's life and how to be church in a community. The broader theological debates are not the core concern but how God wants us to practise our faith individually and as his community in our town and culture on the basis of Biblical studies.

2. Tuning the Biblical studies to a more traditional Africa context

In Felix's part of the paper he has highlighted the need for an authentic African Theology. In the rural context this needs to move from the academic consideration to the actualities of how to shepherd believers in dealing with birth, marriage and death in a thoroughly African Christian way. How to understand the spirit world, how to discern and help people who are demonised. The traditional African world view has more in common with the Biblical world view than some contemporary Western world views. This should be reflected in the training process.

B. Linguistic Considerations

1) Training conducted in the local vernacular

Students must be taught to read and think through the Bible and Biblical concepts in their own language. This greatly increases the impact of the Scriptures on their own lives and enables them to better communicate it to the people they will later train. Trying to transliterate technical terms like 'soteriology,' into a local dialect is a meaningless exercise. I have watched too many theological college students struggle to "translate" all their college notes into local dialects in order to train in rural areas. Translation is a second best method. The best method is to have thought out Biblical concepts first in your mother tongue, your heart language, before attempting it in a second language. If a student is going to spend most of his life ministering in the Cibemba language then train him through the medium of Cibemba.

2) Developing Literacy as part of the Training Course

Some of the most stable effective leaders in a rural church community come from a semi-literate background, which is why many Bible schools and systematic seminar-based training programmes do not set a minimum education standard for applicants. Recognising this, then specific steps to improve literacy should be part of the training programme.

3) Using the advantages of Oral Culture skills in training

Along with developing literary skills, there needs to be an appreciation of the advantages of Oral Cultures, in terms of the beauty of people who can absorb, remember and transmit understanding and knowledge without the use of books. Utilising such techniques will greatly enhance Biblical and theological education in rural contexts.²

4) Incorporating Improvement of Official language Skills into training

Having said that training should be primarily conducted in the mother tongue, for most students this means there is a very limited range of study books available for them to use. In fact in some cases they may not even have the whole Bible in their language or be limited to one version only. If a student's educational background or own

² What it takes to reach people in Oral Cultures. Article in Evangelical Missions Quarterly Vol. 27 John D Wilson 1991

ability allows it, then lessons should be built into the programme to improve their reading and writing skills in the official language of their country. This will open up the world of English or French Bible study aids in most cases.

C. Financial Considerations

1. Incorporating the 'Tent making' Mentality

Whoever may be deemed to be at fault, in many African communities those who go for Bible College training are anticipating entering a salaried full time ministry position. The assumption is that if you are going to serve God "full-time" then a college qualification will help towards getting into a paid job. However in "Rural" church communities, cash in the offering plate may be one of the scarcest commodities to find! No cash no pastor. In truth probably the majority of Christian workers in Africa are either partly or wholly self-supporting, copies of the original "tent-making" as adopted by Paul and other early church workers.³ "Tent-making" as a primary means of support for Christian workers should not only be taught in the training material but modelled by the school. Training facilities based in areas where commodities are bartered as much as cash exchanged, should consider ways of supporting the school through students working for their fees, bringing farm or river produce in lieu of fees and with school staff living by a combination of self-supporting means as well as relying on cash gifts or salaries. As in Acts 6, in order that the focus on "prayer and the Word" be maintained it would be wise to have at least one staff member with skills in and a focus on promoting means of "tent-making," both for staff and student support as well as for infrastructure support.

2. Matching the training with the annual cycles of the people's support systems

In Samfya Bible School, when formulating school terms and seminar programmes, attention was given to the agricultural seasons and fishing cycles in the area. The ideal is to run programmes that people can attend year by year without breaking their normal means of support. In this way the equivalent of a one-year certificate course may be completed in 2-3 years in addition to regular harvest being maintained for family food security.

3. Financial support for training in partly cashless economies

Charging fees in purely cash terms is an obvious barrier. Some have erred at this point and assumed the people can't pay, they are too poor, and so pump in outside cash to cover the fees. But people can pay in kind and to deny them the dignity of that is further damaging to the people's beings and also sows a seed of failure from day one, the training facility will be less likely ever to be self-supporting. Recognising the role of local Christian business people, utilising men and women with entrepreneurial skills is also a key way forward. Another facet to the financial issue is that the material level at which the local churches normally function should in some way guide the size and type of infrastructure of any facility being developed for a training scheme; a matter of 'Appropriate Technology.'

4. Combine practical life skills with Biblical studies

When I talk here of practical studies I am not thinking of how to do children's work or open air evangelism. I am meaning how to make nutritious food from local bush and farm products, how to make a house or repair bicycles, how to mend fishing nets or keep bees, how to improve yields of ground nuts, how to heal a wound, how to escape malaria, how to nurse someone who is terminally ill. A more holistic approach to training would prepare church workers to give guidance in the full range of Biblical community development.

D. Sociological Considerations

1. Choose methodologies that suit the psychology of the people

Taking note of some of the learning style differences between cultures, and recognising that rural contexts will accentuate this, then methods of teaching should reflect the more group/community orientated nature of the students. Western style didactic, prepositional teaching may suit those who have done their primary and secondary education in such institutions. However in rural contexts, students may have learnt in schools mainly by methods of rote learning and in life by doing what others do, modelling and mentoring. The phenomenal memory skills of those used to rote methods of learning should be utilised, along with a lot of interactive question/answer and group discussion sessions, which will go some way to mimicking the mentoring style of learning; a form of community consensus enlightened by Biblical considerations! In encouraging the latter, a less helpful traditional factor can be counteracted, wherein the opinion of a leading figure (chief, bishop, missionary, founding elder) is taken to be an incontrovertible law! The "Lecturer-student" style frequently reinforces the authority of the "chief" rather than that of the Holy Spirit and the Scriptures.

2. Recognise the key role of professionally trained people in the rural areas

A high percentage of churches planted in rural areas have been significantly grounded or influenced by believers who have taken formal employment in rural areas, e.g. school teachers, medical staff and other civil servants. Few of these can afford to take time off for extended training courses, so some shorter specific, but none the less systematic, seminars are targeted at them to improve their ability to function as evangelists, church planters and Bible teachers in their local communities. Taking them out of formal employment generally would be disastrous as the local churches they serve cannot support them financially as church workers. In truth they frequently are both the spiritual and material support system for their local churches through their so-called "secular" employment.

3. Training within the marriage context

³ If "the labourer is worthy of his hire", who pays the bills? Article by T.M. Davies published in Echoes of Service

Advancing the ability of a brother to study the Scriptures without enabling his wife to do so also is a major flaw in any training context. In the places where matrilineal cultures exist, it is a fatal flaw. As the training is in the local vernacular language and taking account of literacy shortcomings (which are generally worse among women), then it should be practically possible to make the compulsory attendance of spouses on the training courses. One AIM College in Eldoret, Kenya, determined not to build any dormitories but only rooms suitable for married quarters, thus from the outset in infrastructure development establishing where their priorities lay in this matter⁴.

4. A focus on HIV/AIDS.

How to understand, prevent and manage AIDS should figure in all courses run by your training system within Africa. The later is the current most obvious need, though actually the prevention side should be the highest priority as long as there remains no real cure for AIDS. The use of ARVs fits into the management of AIDS category and not the prevention bit, even if they are available at all in rural communities. This is an example too where serious theological reflection at higher college level is needed to help overcome the damage and stigma caused by the 1980's hasty pre-judgement that AIDS was essentially an outbreak of the wrath of God on certain sinners. A Christian worker who is not conversant with handling HIV/AIDS issues is ill equipped to serve in Africa today.

E. Missiological Considerations

1. The Need for Cross-Cultural training for Africans

With the emergence of a strong and committed church in many African nations, combined with an increased sense of national calling to international missions, there needs to be a greater focus on cross-cultural missions training within Africa. This should not be merely an importing of standard cross-cultural methodology from Western colleges. Rather an adaptation and a development of ways of preparing believers from an African Christian Cultural base to move outward to the major cultures of the world. While there are numbers of such training places available in Africa e.g. Eldoret in Kenya, there are none specifically run by the Brethren movement. In Zambia we have taken the approach of partnering with a non-denominational cross-cultural training course run by Pro-Christo (Zambia). It could be argued that non-denominational training facilities are a better context to prepare people for cross-cultural service, as learning to function in a multi-theological way is another facet of being capable of serving the Lord multi-culturally. Under rural training, the point I'm making is that some of the best cross-cultural missionaries from Africa can come from the rural context, where their existing ministry experience suits them for reaching similar communities throughout the Two Thirds world. An awareness of this should promote a direct net working from rural training systems into cross cultural training facilities. Of the five Zambia missionaries commended from Brethren churches in Zambia to Mozambique and Tanzania, at least three have come from a "rural" type context.

Following in Jesus Footsteps?

The over-riding point which comes out of the considerations in this paper is that careful consideration must be given to the context in which a student will serve God in the future, before designing in any way a training system or facility in which to prepare the student. It affects not only the curriculum but the very infrastructure of the training school you may have in mind to develop. The tendency is to move from the long established college concepts downwards when planning schemes to train the vast numbers of local leaders needed to shepherd churches in rapid church growth areas. Many who are called by God to pioneer or develop such training systems are from theological college backgrounds. As we learn most by modelling, the tendency is for those from a college trained background to think "colleges and schools" when carrying out ministry where ever they go, mimicking the way they were trained themselves. Tackling the huge training needs in "rural" areas in Africa needs a lot more lateral thinking than that.

It is worthwhile reflecting on the fact that in Jesus day the 'college' model of training existed, where the best boys went to the so-called university of their day, such as the Apostle Paul under Gamaliel in Jerusalem. Jesus chose to train men from a 'rural' context in a rural context and used a 'field-sensitive' type methodology. Interestingly, while some of his disciples no doubt functioned well in the 'rural' context, many were greatly effective in urban contexts too and able to work among the best educated of peoples. And where the Master has trod, ought not the servants tread there still?

Greater consideration needs to be given to combining formal school based courses and shorter specialised workshops with church based seminars and weekly Bible classes along with available personal study courses (such as Emmaus). The key to training such a large number of people lies in enabling the resources that already exist in many languages to be better and more systematically used. It is my prayer that through this consultation there will be a clearer understanding of the particular needs in training for "rural" settings and that some practical plans of action can be drawn up by higher level

⁴ P98 "Internationalising Missionary Training" W.E.F.

Bible School and colleges to better prepare their own students to function more appropriately in training situations in the many rural areas where they are desperately needed.

REFERENCES

W.E.F. 1991. *Internationalising Missionary Training*. Baker Books/Paternoster Press

Evangelical Missions Quarterly, Various, see footnotes for details.