

Training for the Frontiers: Who Does What?

What is involved in the multi-faceted challenge of training for frontier missions?
Note the unique yet complementary roles of academics, mission agencies and admonishers
(mission mobilizers) in meeting the frontier training challenge.

by Gary R. Corwin

“Who am I and why am I here?” With that famous line Admiral James Stockdale achieved perhaps the only memorable part of his 1992 campaign for the office of Vice President of the United States. It’s not a bad question.

Who are we and why are we here? We are members of the Evangelical Missiological Society and the International Society for Frontier Missions-academics, agencies and admonishers (i.e., mobilizers and researchers) who, under and alongside of the churches, bear enormous responsibility for training up a force for reaching the frontiers.

It is a pleasure to be here and to explore with you the inter-relationship of the responsibilities we share as trainers. Together with God’s people around the world we have a key role to play in taking the Gospel of Christ to the least reached peoples of the earth.

While there is certainly no shortage of opportunity in the training task, there has sometimes been a shortage of efficiency and effectiveness in the doing of it. This is usually because efforts have not been coordinated adequately. In trying to do too much through our particular spheres as academics, agencies and admonishers we have too often played to our weaknesses instead of to our particular strengths. That is why we are looking at this issue.

Before we go on, please allow me to take time to make this point. While the issue we are addressing is an important one, it pales into insignificance in comparison to at least one other. In some

parts of the world, mission training of any kind barely exists! Hence dealing with this issue must be priority number one!

Because a number of very talented, committed, and widely experienced people are here to focus especially on this crucial issue, we have chosen a road less traveled-to focus on this related matter of complementary roles and training efficiency. In doing so, perhaps we can better understand and appreciate our particular strengths in training for the frontiers. This in turn may help to reduce duplication and counter-productive activities, thus freeing up additional resources to address the global availability issue as well.

Definitions and Assumptions

For communication to be meaningful in any discussion, it is important that everyone understands how terms are being used and what assumptions are being made. To that end we begin with a brief explanation of terms and assumptions which underlie this paper. There is no intention here to argue superiority for any of the definitions used. Terms are simply highlighted to show the way we understand and are using them.

To begin with, when we talk about training for the frontiers, what is meant by training? While we understand the many subtle distinctions that educators draw between terms like education, teaching/learning, mentoring, training, etc., we are using “training” in a rather broad way which includes at least two key dimensions: 1) motivation to appro-

priate response, and 2) equipping with the knowledge and skills to respond effectively.

In the same way, what do we understand by the term “frontiers?” In current missiological discussion (in the context of the ISFM and EMS, at least) the term seems to be understood in essentially two ways: 1) wherever completion of the Great Commission among a people is not yet on a self-sustaining basis, and 2) wherever the least reached peoples of the earth are located. The training paradigms we will be discussing should fit equally well with either understanding.

Other obvious terms which require some definitional comment include the sources of specialized training under discussion-academics, agencies and admonishers. By “academics” we mean institutions or programs of formal missions training, normally leading to a degree. By “agencies” we mean organizations primarily engaged in the hands-on work of missions outreach, which engage in training as an essential adjunct to their task.

The third major training group is what we call the admonishers. This is the group that has really carried the lion’s share of missions training at the two congregational levels over the last decade. By “admonishers” we mean mobilization and research groups that exist to assist churches, and the rest of the mission community, to fulfill their callings in world evangelization. We shall touch mostly on this group in a later section on complementary roles in the training of congregations.

Issues of training do raise questions about the levels to be addressed. For the

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purposes of this article we are again taking a broad view, with at least four levels of training being assumed. These include in ascending order of complexity, the training required by 1) congregations in general, 2) local church missions advocates, 3) vocational missionaries and 4) outreach pioneers and strategists. This approach is premised in turn on the assumption that local churches are the foundational trainers for outreach to the frontiers.

Well-grounded disciples of Christ are the building blocks of any mission outreach, and only the churches can provide them. The work of academics, agencies and admonishers only builds on the most basic work that churches do of training disciples. Some of the larger local churches, of course, are able to do some or all of the work of the others as well.

Academics and Agencies in Training Workers

In this first section on unique roles we focus primarily on how the academics and mission agencies can best utilize their particular strengths to train workers for the frontiers. The levels of training in view here are primarily those of the vocational missionary, and the outreach pioneers and strategists.

In something less than two decades missiology as an academic discipline has gone from being something less than obscure, to holding an increasingly prominent position among the disciplines that make up evangelical theological education. This is principally due to the enduring influence of the Spirit and Word of God on the hearts and minds of God's people. Our God, after all, is a missionary God.

But it is also due to some secondary causes, among which one might mention the idea of the "global village," and the fact that our world is increasingly interdependent in all spheres of life. It no longer permits the comfortable isolationist

mentality of "Me and mine, we four, no more." Even theologians are increasingly coming to recognize that they need help and guidance from missiologists, if they are going to cope well with the pluralistic and universalistic assumptions that challenge the very essence of evangelical faith today.

At the same time that this is happening, however, the emphasis in the curricula of missions training institutions and departments seems to have increasingly shifted away from those areas where their greatest contributions can be made. Areas such as the theology of missions, history of missions, and the study of world religions, while still part of almost all programs in at least some fashion, have often been overshadowed to a large degree by a plethora of methodological and strategic update courses. This has meant that many of the students coming to mission agencies for service are coming with woefully inadequate background in the essentials—those things which provide the depth, conviction, insight and sticking power for mature long-term ministry. In their place, they often come with highly inflated views of their own methodological prowess.

While seldom stated so bluntly, a mindset sometimes lurks just below the surface in many of these who come which says, "I have studied how missions ought to be done, and I am now here to share that with you and to help you do penance for all the errors which have characterized your previous efforts." The response of veteran missionaries to this is predictable, though varied. It can range from amusement combined with a commitment to gentle mentoring, to anger and defensiveness, which all too often results in the loss of good people to the mission enterprise. While education in some will always have the result of "puffing up," much of this is avoidable if greater pains are taken to bring students to an appreciation of both the complexities of the task, and the

history of how others have dealt with them.

Do not take these comments to mean we are advocating a retreat to ivory tower training that neglects the practical skills needed for effective ministry. None of the agencies are interested in that. What would be helpful, though, is to see a greater effort in the institutions to emphasize the basics of mission theology and history, as well as the knowledge of world religions, and how to deal with them in effective apologetic ways.

When the methodological and strategy-oriented courses are offered, they are most helpful when they are approached in a survey rather than an advocacy fashion. If students can be taught to critically evaluate methods, including a recognition that one size never fits all, the result in the various fields of ministry around the globe will surely be improved. At the very least, one source of unnecessary tension within ministry areas will be greatly reduced.

We believe that effectively adapting ministry methods to the exigencies of culture and circumstance is a part of training that the agencies, rather than the institutions, are best positioned to do. That is not to say that we want candidates ignorant of methods, but that those trained in the history and variety of methods, rather than those tutored in particular strongly advocated methods, will make the best contributions in ministry. The advanced courses in methods should be reserved for the missionary with some experience under his belt, not for the uninitiated.

At the same time, candidates coming who are weak in the theological foundations of mission present a challenge that is very difficult for agencies to respond to adequately. James Hunter, for example, has outlined the extent of "slippage" that has occurred in the coming generations of evangelicals over the historic understandings of doctrines such as the lostness of men apart from Christ (Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation, University of Chicago Press,

1987). Even those not specifically advocating a less severe, but biblically questionable view, are often influenced by it.

The agencies really need to be able to count on the institutions to teach biblically and soundly in this area. The teachable moment has often long since passed by the time the candidate comes to the agency. And that does not even address the larger problem of those who never face the challenge of missions seriously in the first place, because their understanding of its necessity has been so poorly established.

A similar case can be made for needing significant teaching in the subjects of the world religions. (And this ought to be for all the students, not just for those in the mission track.) Islam and Hinduism, to name just the two most important ones, represent perhaps our greatest challenge in world evangelization. Their own massive investment in evangelistic effort only magnifies the impact of that challenge. Young people need to know the truth about these religions, including their philosophical underpinnings. They also need to know how to interact with them in effective apologetic ways. It is essential for new outreach, as well as in arming all believers to respond to this great challenge.

Mission agencies are in a good position to build upon a basic knowledge in these areas. They are generally well equipped to guide the new missionary with contextual adaptations and methodological insights. They are poorly suited, however, to the time consuming task of strengths of the academic institutions become essential.

In summary, if the academic institutions can do the yeoman task of teaching the basics of mission theology and history (including the methodologies inherent in both), and provide inexperienced students with a good understanding of world religions, the agencies can then do much of the methodological, strategic, and cross-cultural

training that has come to assume such a large role in institutional curricula today. This is not to advocate that the institutions totally ignore these areas, but that they concentrate on the all-important basics, and recognize that they have capable allies who are in many ways better positioned to address these latter issues. Where the insti-

well. While good cooperation has existed between the spheres in a number of areas, it is also true to say that a more efficient and effective approach, characterized by much closer cooperation is needed. This is true in at least two areas which focus on specialist training: 1) Training workers in the task; and 2) Training a new generation of workers cross-culturally.

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tutions should go deeper into the methods and strategy issues is in providing forums where veteran missionaries from scattered parts of the globe can wrestle together with academics concerning those issues. This may be in the context of pursuing advanced degrees such as the Th. M., the D.Min., the D.Miss. and the Ph.D., or simply through hosting periodic mission workshops. All such opportunities are helpful.

Complementary Roles

The role of training vocational missionaries and outreach pioneers and strategists is generally considered the primary purview of the academics, with the agencies playing a strong secondary role. We have already discussed how a more rational division of labor and curriculum design may be able to strengthen the outcomes of such training.

However, there are additional ways that academics and agencies can be strengthened in their training roles, many of which involve more synergistic relationships with one another, and some times with the community of admonishers as

Training in the Task

The emphasis here is on continuing education of workers already engaged in the task, although there are several applications to training workers for the task, as well.

To begin with the obvious, closer cooperation could certainly improve the training quality in many field courses and issues-oriented workshops and consultations. On one side, a flood of uncontextualized and competitive academic extension programs from the West is definitely worth avoiding. But so is an arrogant agency spirit that says either, "We don't need further training. We are the experts," or "Whatever training we may need we can certainly provide ourselves, without the input of academic types." The fact is that the very best insightful cognitive and experiential input brought together in an environment of honest reflection, open discussion and thoughtful analysis. Both academics and agencies have particular strengths to bring to that process.

Some of the most valuable work shops, consultations, and courses we have conducted in SIM have certainly fit this kind of cooperative model. Whether the issues were church planting, contextualization for Islamic ministry, development strategy, continuing education for nurses, urban research, or whatever, the input of other agencies and the academic community has

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always enhanced the value and attractiveness of these efforts. The increasingly flexible extension-type programs offered by many academic institutions is a very positive development. Whether instituted as a defensive measure in the face of changing demographic realities, or the result of improved educational philosophy, the change is certainly a boon to the training of missionaries. Among the most innovative, the highly portable, integrated, and mentor-based extension M.A. program being developed by Ralph Winter et al, is extremely exciting. We hope that many schools will choose to offer it as an approved alternative program of their own.

All extension programs are not equal, however. Those most appreciated, of course, are sensitive not only to the needs of the missionary-student, but also to the needs of the developing churches and to the strategic goal of enhancing and strengthening their outreach and ministries. Worthy programs do not feather their own institutional nests at the expense of indigenous principles.

Another area where academics and agencies can continue to assist one another and thereby enhance one another's effectiveness would include increasing the scope and effectiveness of internships through short-term assignments. Agencies need to provide increasing numbers of well-designed and well-supervised opportunities. They also need to make very sure missionaries involved are both committed to, and gifted for, their supervisory and mentoring roles. By the same token, academics need to be sensitive to the fact that agencies operate pretty consistently in the face of personnel shortages, and not add to their burdens unnecessarily by requiring excessive administrative paperwork.

Finally, there is a whole world of opportunity open in the area of personnel exchanges. There is a large and increasing body of dual focus individuals who are characterized by excellence in both their

academic and missionary careers. Many are card-carrying Western missionaries who teach in the seminaries or colleges of the world Christian movement, or serve in leadership positions within their mission agencies. Others are non-Western missionaries or church leaders doing exactly the same thing. Still others are the professors (missions and otherwise) in seminaries and colleges whose passion and avocation in ministry includes a heart for the whole world, and who use their gifts and energy in every way they can to see that God is glorified in it.

Increasingly both these individuals and the bodies from which they come are seeing that good stewardship and good policy requires sharing. More and more missionaries and professors are being freed up by their agencies and institutions to teach in exchange situations. Their leaders are realizing that to do so has several important benefits:

First, this cost-effective opportunity for cross-fertilization keeps the exchange sharp and stimulated. Second, the exchange provides a fresh and vital teaching component to the receiving institution or agency. Finally, the process provides one of the most powerful advertisements for the supplying mission or school that one could want. What better way to provide students with an opportunity to see and know the heartbeat of an articulate and attractive representative of the sending agency or institution?

The burgeoning of intensive modular courses offered in one to three week units all over the world has tapped in-to this huge resource. The resulting flow is two-directional and usually very healthy (the exception being where inadequate attention is given to contextualizing what is taught). Today many professors use their holiday periods for direct mission work, often with their own students, and often in strategic cross-cultural teaching roles.

More and more missionaries with doctoral degrees are staying with their agencies, or coming back to them, many continuing to devote part of their year to teaching. (The CEO's of at least three IFMA missions have come back in the last year or two.) This trend is attributable at least partially, one senses, to the fact that the choice is no longer so stark between being a missionary or teaching in a seminary or college. Many of these servants are doing both. May their "sociological people group" increase.

A New Generation Of Workers

The issue here turns on the priority need mentioned earlier-insuring that quality missions mobilization and training is available wherever the church exists. While there are bright spots of progress around the globe, the needs are still vast. For the immediate future, at least, a very sizable contribution of personnel and financial resources from Western agencies and mission training institutions will no doubt be required. What a challenge! But what an opportunity! If ever an area existed that argued for effective mobilization of, and coordination between, academics and agencies, this is it.

Many things have and will be said about this issue, so we will limit our comments to one small piece of it-the simple but foundational matter of appropriate attitudes and relationships. All that has been said above with regard to cooperation applies here as well. In addition, however, is This must take place in an atmosphere in which Western agencies and academics listen very carefully to the hopes and visions of indigenous church and mission leadership. It is possible to move forward together only within a framework built on relationships of mutual trust. Relationships, not programs, are the key.

Unfortunately that is not always where the emphasis has laid. While giving lip service to the Church as God's chosen

instrument of evangelization and ministry, international conferences and consultations often take place, and networking systems are established, without ever asking that most basic of questions, “How can they better assist the churches around the world to fulfill their missionary vision?” This must change.

Too often it seems, global outreach agendas are set three or four steps away from the frontiers, while the churches one step away are invited to either get on board or get out of the way. Seldom are they even asked what their vision and passion in missions might be. The assumption seems to be that the churches are either incapable of strategic mission planning (at best), or that they are self-serving and unreliable stewards of the Gospel (at worst). But few things could be farther from the truth.

It is often these churches in closest proximity to frontier peoples around the globe who carry the lion’s share of the burden (including reprisals) of actual outreach to the least reached. (Many examples could be cited in even the most restrictive access parts of the globe.)

We must help to articulate and facilitate their vision. We must help to communicate the story of their sacrifices. We must help them to train their youth for the frontiers.

Complementary Roles

This section explores what is probably the most fertile opportunity for the three spheres to improve their effectiveness through synergistic labors together. It is also an area in which the admonishers have clearly led the way in recent years.

If the academics and the agencies are best positioned to train the vocational missionary and outreach pioneer, the admonishers are uniquely positioned for training at the congregational levels through

their mobilization ministries. Their more objective and broad-based posture gives them an advantage over the agencies in grassroots missions training (e.g. APMC, Mission Frontiers), and their generally closer relationships to local church missions personnel gives them an advantage over the academics. It is in the realm

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of complementary training roles, however, that their contribution can shine most brightly. Without doubt, the mission mobilization and global research community (the admonishers) has done an outstanding job of raising the profile of mission in the evangelical community at large. Most of what they do can be applauded without hesitation. Some of their communication, however, has lacked missiological balance. The teaching task, for example, which is at the heart of the disciple-making mandate of the Great Commission, seldom gets mentioned. And worse, bedrock theological principles (e.g. “salvation by grace through faith”) are sometimes treated as irrelevant in the context of discussions about appropriate mission deployment. Clearly, greater synergism is needed in the realm of foundational missions training in the churches. In the last decade, providing such training in the churches has become the primary purview of the admonishers, with agencies and academics usually fulfilling only supportive roles. This has had the ironic result of increasing the objectivity of missions training on one level (moving beyond the appearance that individual mission agencies are simply feathering

their own nests), while actually decreasing the objectivity of missions training on another (providing balanced answers, rather than catchy slogans and sound bites, to foundational missiological questions).

Because of their strong mobilization commitment, admonishers will almost always come down on the side of impact,

when the choice is between impact and telling the whole story. This is particularly so when the latter may require a somewhat tedious explanation. The bias of the agencies and academics, on the other hand, tends to come down on the side of telling the whole story (even at the expense of impact, and too often to the point of

boredom) because credibility is so important.

The unfortunate result is that agencies and academics sometimes view admonishers as reckless and irresponsible, while admonishers view the agencies and academics as self-serving and defensive. We have probably all been guilty of seeking to be understood before we have sought to understand, to borrow an important concept from author Stephen Covey.

What is needed is more common forums at levels that touch local congregations. Societies such as ISFM and EMS are fine for us to talk to each other, but we must more consistently talk together to the people in the pews, on the missions committees, and in the pastoral studies. We are sending mixed signals and, predictably, we are getting mixed results.

Church mission committees increasingly seem to fall into one of two categories—no policies or rigid policies. Thoughtful and flexible policies are likely to remain fairly rare unless we start sending a more consistent and thoughtful message.

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But what will it take to make that happen? Perhaps this is a worthy subject for discussion during our time together. One wonders, for example, what would happen, if instead of everybody publishing only their own news and views, we did a lot more interactive and dialog type articles together in our various publications.

One of the areas of greatest need is effectively articulating answers to the big issues of missiological import. The kinds of issues that come to mind here include questions such as "What is the missionary task?" "How ought that task to be carried out, and what are reasonable time frames for doing so?" "Why is mission so important any way?" "Who are the unreached?" "...the least reached?" "Are those who have never heard really lost?" "Who sends the missionary?" The list could go on.

In addition, there are pressing questions that relate to our own missiological context; questions like "What is and what should be the significance of the year 2000?" "What are the strategic flash points of missionary endeavor today?" "How can the Western missionary enterprise relate most helpfully and effectively to the emerging missions of the Two-Thirds world?" "How ought mission to be financed?" "Is evangelistic unity really the key to world evangelism?" "How important is theology to mission?"

Many of these and other questions that could be mentioned are not particularly new, but the answers to them are being redefined at a rapid pace, usually without adequate reflection and dialog. It seems sometimes that whoever has the communication media in place wins the day. Issues are more often lobbied, it would seem, than discussed. Is it any wonder there is confusion in the pews?

Where the Scriptures and the lessons of history remain central in the process, the outcome is usually better than the process. Where the Scriptures and the lessons of history are merely given a nod, however, as

the latest social science theory or unsupported research assumption carries the day, the results are counterproductive at best. Where theology is demeaned as unimportant or divisive, and evangelism is lifted up as the unifying process that will win the world and usher in God's Kingdom on earth, we actually stand in danger of committing idolatry—an idolatry of worshipping the task, and being ultimately disqualified from service to the Holy God who initiated it. May God keep us from it.

On the brighter side, programs like the Perspectives Course are works of mobilizational genius. Nothing has been more successful in getting academic and agency personnel together with church people to discuss the big issues of missions. Similarly, the work of Adopt-A-People in linking agencies and churches in a context of attractive and accurate people group information is a very positive development.

So what is the sum of the matter? There is a credibility advantage when a non-agency third party becomes the trumpet for the importance of the Church's primary task of missions. For better or worse, individual agencies, and even academic institutions, are always at least a little bit suspect with regard to their objectivity in these matters. Clearly, admonishers have an advantage on this point, and a large contribution to make.

At the same time, however, admonishes hurt their credibility when they treat theology like a burden to be borne. Admonishers should be quick to acknowledge that there are bedrock theological issues, such as "justification by grace through faith;" and that these are not sectarian luxuries, but define basic Christianity and the missiological tasks that flow from it. The same can be said need for affirming the importance of teaching in the discipling process, as the Great Commission does. If this were

done, instead of making impassioned but non-discriminating pleas for missionary redeployment, the influence of admonishers would only be strengthened.

Conclusions

We have looked together at both unique and complementary roles in training for the frontiers. A number of broad conclusions are suggested:

1. Greater effectiveness in the task of training for the frontiers is both needed and possible.
2. Greater effectiveness will result from academics, agencies, and admonishers majoring first of all on their unique strengths, avoiding duplication wherever possible.
3. There are areas of training where the spheres can strengthen one another by working synergistically together.
4. Training (and strategizing) for the frontiers must not bypass culturally-near churches of the South and East in favor of those from the North and West.
5. Training for the frontiers at the congregational level is highly strategic in our day. There is perhaps no area where synergistic cooperation can pay greater dividends, or where the lack of it can play greater mischief. Let us conclude by emphasizing the key point that training for the frontiers, like functioning as the Body of Christ, requires a variety of gifts and functions. While neither academics, agencies, nor admonishers can do it all, each has a part to play. When all the parts are working together in harmony and mutual respect, the total impact is much greater than the sum of its parts. May the Lord multiply and blend our efforts for His glory in this way.

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