

Itinerant, Cross-Cultural Equipping:

Low Cost, Low Return, Colonialist Missions or a Paradigm worth Exploring?

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Last weekend I was training just outside Washington D.C. A long-time Sonlife alumni walked up to me before the training started and said, "Hey Dave. I've been meaning to call you. Our church has a partnership with some nationals in Indonesia. I'm going there next month. I'd love to talk to you about how I can train the Strategy there." At the midmorning break, two more guys had similar conversations with me about Ukraine and Turkey. At lunch it was Mexico, and before I left for the day, the inquires were about Korea and Brazil. Last weekend wasn't an anomaly from my overall experience these days. The same thing happened to me the week before when I was training in Minneapolis. Meanwhile, back at the office, we're getting 40-50 phone calls and/or emails a week from Sonlife alumni who want to train Sonlife materials cross culturally. I expect your week-by-week experiences are similar in this regard.

I guess a guy like me who is passionate for the globe should be thrilled about the growing enthusiasm to multiply Sonlife's values to all nations. In one way I am. How exciting to see the growing passion on the part of the North American church to run after the global implications of the Great Commission. It wasn't too long ago I felt like a lone ranger when it came to having a heart for global youth ministry. On the other hand, I feel a little gun shy having just finished a two-year study exploring what happens when North American pastors travel overseas for ten days to two weeks to train national pastors. The findings were less than flattering.

Is there a way to redeem the desire from the North American church to be so personally involved in training and equipping church leaders globally? At the heart of Sonlife and GYI is a desire to be about incarnational and indigenous ministry. Can those values be transferred through itinerant delivery systems? In order to get us thinking about these issues, I've included a brief summary of some of my conclusions from my study, *The Emperor's New Clothes: Experiences of Stateside Church Leaders Who Train Cross Culturally*.

The study indicated that the issues involved in itinerant, cross-cultural ministry are much more deeply rooted and complex than what can be altered and addressed solely through pre-departure training. The findings revealed that the key factors for consideration include the values of the organization involved, the frames of reference embedded in the teaching material and the teacher, the selection of those who will train cross-culturally, the preparation of the trainers selected, and the duration of the cross-cultural teaching sojourn. Each of these determinants feed each other and are dependent upon one another. I have limited this paper to discussing three of these five key factors, the organizational values, the selection process, and the pre-departure training.

Organizational Values

The subjects in my study often demonstrated new-world-order agendas. I am using the term "new world order" to refer to the perpetuation by dominant forces of a uniform global culture. The new world order assumes a hierarchical relationship between the center and the periphery and assumes the center knows what is best for the periphery (Barber, 1996). The new-world order agendas evident in the subjects for this study were at least in part, the responsibility of Sonlife. Some of the ways Sonlife and its leadership, including me, were responsible for the findings of this study include both the way the trainers were recruited for the cross-cultural contexts and the very nature of Sonlife training materials. Trainers were recruited for the cross-cultural training trips based on what was advertised as the cry of churches around the world for help in reaching their youth. I did plenty to promote this need myself. In the midst of conducting the analysis for this study I wrote the following as part of a promotional piece sent out by Sonlife:

Consider this...

* Rev. Wu of Wuhan, China pastors 14 congregations and his only training comes from his two ministry books, both of which he's read many, many times.

* Pastor Immanuel shepherds over 20 churches throughout the poorest country in the world--Sierra Leone. His only training consists of a six week course he attended several years ago.

* Evangelist Rakesh in Northern India is a 20 year old who is planting churches in 15 different villages. He only came to Christ a year ago but does the best he can to teach people the Word.

85 percent of churches around the globe are led by pastors who have never received any training... [Sonlife has] gifted, trained people ready to equip their peers. (D. Livermore, personal communication, April 2001)

The information I wrote is accurate. However, it clearly emphasizes the American's role in helping international church leaders, and it sounds like the very condescension evident in the subjects sampled. It is not that American pastors have nothing to offer or give pastors elsewhere.

Operating primarily from the mindset of my promotional piece, however, quickly leads to dehumanizing our international colleagues rather than empowering them. I am reminded how quickly we can slip into subtle participation in new brands of colonialism, simply dressing the "Emperor in new clothes". I'm increasingly convinced that our sinfulness inclines all of us toward narrow, nationalistic thinking. "Knowledge IS power" and when we have something others lack, we are easily tempted to use that as leverage over the recipients of our ministry (Foucault, 1969).

Engel and Dryness (2000) say it well: Today those who come from the outside must come alongside their counterparts with a desire to facilitate and enable all that those onsite are trying to accomplish, to see what "value" can be added from their presence. They must be sensitive, in other words, both to what God is already doing there and to the capabilities God has raised up in that place. The West is in a wonderful position to provide leadership development and specialized skills. But these must be offered with no strings attached and an authentic affirmation that we are equal partners with no desire to control or influence (p. 97).

Although Sonlife espouses a commitment to empowering learners through a facilitative approach to learning, the very nature of our Christological strategy for ministering to youth can easily incline us toward a prescriptive, formulaic approach to equipping. We have a strong commitment to understanding Christ's historical and cultural context rather than mindlessly presuming that everything he did should be replicated by church leaders today. However, trainers often present it far more prescriptively than what any of our leadership intends.

Many of the subjects in this study appeared to view the Bible as the "Word of God, pure and simple, rather than the Word of God as mediated through the life experiences and cultural settings of the biblical authors" (Noll, 1994, p. 133). The revisionistic lens through which an individual reads and interprets the Bible was also unrecognized by most of the subjects. When Scripture is used as a model for leadership and ministry with the absence of praxis, ascertaining exactly what the Scriptures say and in turn prescribing that to others around the world is frightening. This is not unlike what Augustine (1982) criticized so many years ago: "To defend their utterly foolish and obviously untrue statements, [some Christians] will call on Holy Scripture...[to] support their position, although they understand neither what they say nor the things about which they make assertion" (pp. 42-43).

Sonlife must develop new means to empower our multipliers around the world to learn from one another as we study Scripture. The multi cultural diversity among Sonlife's multipliers around the world affords us a unique resource to study issues and Scripture using widely diverse cultural perspectives. "Today we need a truly global conversation and collaboration, where everyone will be heard, and all will learn together" (Engel & Dyrness, 2000, p. 96). We have to pro actively fight against reducing the tensions these discussions will raise to the "right" interpretation.

In addition, new training resources are needed. Sonlife has developed some strong discovery-oriented materials wherein learners work with others to construct their understanding of Christ's approach to ministry and the implications thereof. These pieces need to be further refined and made more central to the training initiatives used internationally. New resources like these need to be developed using multicultural teams from around the world. A unique niche exists for Sonlife within the evangelical scene internationally. A true commitment and plan to work interdependently across the globe to develop strategies and training will make Sonlife a unique and more Christ-like organization.

Sonlife must continue to be alert to the potential of perpetuating colonialistic approaches.

Trainers must enter culturally-diverse contexts first as a learner. They must spend time to understand what local youth workers are already doing there. There is no need to toss aside any desire to help but the trainers should be aware that they may come home learning far more than the students they just taught. GYI partners must lead the way in forging an empowering, Christ like paradigm of cross-cultural multiplication. This begins not with the trainers but with the values we embody as organizations.

Selection of Trainers

The study clearly revealed that although predeparture training is valuable and important, far more important is the selection process of those who participate in cross-cultural teaching assignments. The study indicated that an individual's sense of self in light of the imago dei, is the most powerful variable shaping the way one ministers cross-culturally. Multipliers are needed who possess a self-as-process orientation, wherein one is reflective about how they live and what they value. A constructive sense of self empowers one toward lifelong development as a disciple and disciple maker. This kind of identity, rooted most in the work of the Cross, has the potential to help multipliers learn how to think critically about contradictory perspectives surfaced through cross-cultural ministry (Bennett, 1993).

Although an assessment can in no way happen objectively, we need to develop an objective checklist from which to begin selecting participants for cross-cultural ministry. Based on the findings of this study, as well as those that recur in the literature on acculturation, the following represent the kinds of things that need to be assessed. Some questions have been listed under each section below as an indication of the issues needing to be explored. Multipliers are needed who are:

Relationally strong. Relational affinity will communicate and vice versa. Sonlife trainers and others like them have been part of some excellent international partnerships despite the nationalistic tendencies that have often been present. The relational affiliation is what has typically made the difference. How do trainers interact with people stateside? Do they easily read people and their needs? Do they ask questions well and remove attention from themselves? Can they laugh at themselves?

Reflective in praxis. Does the trainer demonstrate a reflective stance when describing other cross-cultural experiences? Trainers who question their assumptions based on what they see in a foreign context can play a major role in how well they facilitate learning cross-culturally. Is there an

unhealthy level of confidence? Is there a willingness to put in question the way they think and act? Is there a theoretical framework guiding their cross-cultural interactions? Are they lifelong learners?

Cautious in using examples. The findings indicated trainers' shared conclusion that illustrations should be avoided when teaching cross-culturally. The students, however, struggled to implement purely theoretical teaching. Do trainers exhibit an ability to demonstrate theoretical concepts for application without presenting the illustration as the "right" way to apply the concept? Can trainers move freely between the theoretical and applied realms?

Secure in their contexts. Sometimes trainers seem to think deprecating American culture and all it represents is the best way to establish credibility cross-culturally. Realizing that American culture has many weaknesses is an asset; however trying to be something we are not is a liability. How do trainers perceive and describe state side culture? What is their level of awareness of cultural dynamics? Security with one's own culture comes from a self-as-process orientation.

Committed to partnership. Training is merely a means to an end, and the long-term value of blowing into a place one time, sharing some information, and moving on to the next stop is questionable. Long-term equipping partnerships built on relationships have the potential of truly empowering other leaders. What connection do trainers see between formal teaching and on-the-job learning? Are trainers willing to be part of a long-term partnership, either personally or as partners with others?

Developing more reflective questions on the applications for participation in cross cultural training trips is one way to begin exploring these kinds of issues, but the assessment needed requires far more than just reading a submitted application. Ideally, face to face interaction and on-site observation of the individual training and working in his or her local ministry will help produce the kind of information needed to answer the preceding questions.

I am increasingly convinced that we need to recruit and develop a core group of international trainers rather than using any Sonlife trainer to equip cross-culturally. These multipliers should be selected based upon his or her proclivity toward a self-as-process orientation. Just as we identify and recruit proven multipliers to serve as Associate Staff system?" I get responses like: "I was encouraged to pray more...I was humbled by my wealth." That's all nice and good but is there nothing deeper? When asked to reflect on the prescriptive nature of the training, it seems to go nowhere...How do I foster that kind of reflection?

How do you get trainers to think about the software of the culture and not only the hardware? Everyone seems to cite the obvious differences and observations that come from a surface-level analysis. How can more in-depth analysis be stimulated?

Does evangelicalism breed such superficial thinking? Is there a causal link between my sample being a bunch of youth pastors and their limited critical thinking or would I find similar kinds of responses from a different group of trainers? Is it more related to them being practitioners or to being evangelicals? Or neither? In fairness, these trainers aren't a whole lot unlike the corporate trainers I meet "on the road" who train internationally. They don't seem very reflective either. But I would hope for something more in church leaders.

How do I foster this kind of critical self-reflection?? That's going to be key in preparing people to acculturate as educators, whatever the context! How do we train trainers to train others to engage in it? Those are the things I need to unlock and in so doing, I must continue to engage in some serious, critical self-reflection of my own, (D. Livermore, personal journal, November 9, 2000)

Subjects' analyses were primarily concrete rather than abstract. Most of them evidenced practice without good theory. There were occasional rays of hope when one or two subjects expressed their many uncertainties or the presuppositions they were questioning.

Theory is often held in disdain by ministry practitioners, especially by those of us in youth ministry. However, "when our lived experience of theorizing is fundamentally linked to processes of self-recovery, of collective liberation, no gap exists between theory and practice" (Hooks, 1994, p. 61). The evangelical subculture has lauded practice above theory for several decades (Noll, 1994). However, nothing is more practical than a sound theory.

GYI partners are positioned well for practical theory given our philosophy-based approach to ministry. We need to leverage that position. As multipliers are empowered to engage in praxis, they have the chance to evaluate previously held claims with new experiences and information. Questioning one's assumption is essential in order to effectively equip people from diverse cultures.

Last year our family spent nearly half the year in Singapore. While there, we stayed in a beautiful condominium complete with five free-form swimming pools, a gym, playgrounds, and many other amenities. We lived unlike the 75 percent of Singaporeans who have much more modest housing, subsidized by the government. A couple days after our family arrived in Singapore, my three-year-old daughter Emily said, "Daddy! You know what I love about Singapore?" "What?" I replied. She said, "Everyone in Singapore gets to go swimming every day!" After laughing I told her, "Even those who live in housing developments like ours are too busy to go swimming more than once a month. Besides, most Singaporeans do not live in places with swimming pools." She was not convinced. She knew what she was experiencing and was certain every other child in the country had the same paradise like life she did right then.

I began reflecting on how Emily's assumption was not unlike what many of the participants in my study did. They presumed that their experiences in a given culture could be generalized to what everyone in that culture experienced. Worse yet, some presumed that whatever they experienced cross-culturally was reflective of what happens anywhere cross culturally outside the United States.

A key to developing praxis, that is action rooted in strong theory, lies in the ability to continually question one's assumptions. Trainers going into foreign contexts for only two weeks have an increased challenge to even begin exposing the assumptions at work in their perceptions and practice. Anderson and Anderson's (2000) wrote: "When we travel to a new country, we feel an almost irresistible impulse to smooth over the strangeness, the distinct particularity of the people we meet. We slip seamlessly into supposing that they are just like ourselves, and we almost forget to marvel at the differences. It's not until we have dwelt in the new country long enough to be shocked, repeatedly, at the wrongness of our assumptions that we begin to notice the crucial things we have missed." (p. 41)

Storti (1990) also asserts that brief cross-cultural encounters typically result in sojourners ignoring differences and focusing upon similarities. At six weeks in a cross-cultural setting, a foreigner often begins to face the first cycle of heightened awareness of cultural differences. After working through some of the dissonance caused by seeing differences, the foreigner usually moves into a new level of understanding and socializing into the new context. Three months into a cross-cultural sojourn is another marker when expatriates often experience cultural differences with a new level of intensity, and again at six months, and one year. The way one responds to the awareness of those differences significantly shapes how the individual acculturates and whether or not metamorphosis occurs (Black et al., 1991; Oberg, 1960; Van Maanen, 1976).

More extended immersion in a diverse context is likely to play a much stronger role in fostering effectiveness than a two week sojourn will. However, as multipliers incorporate those short-term experiences within the larger scope of their lives and ministries, and specifically as they reflect on them in light of their experiences, cross-cultural ministry can provide a powerful means of exploring their assumptions.

The findings indicated the need for a radical change in the way Sonlife multiplies internationally through non-residential expats. Pre-departure training developed within a comprehensive plan for transformational learning among Sonlife trainers is a key determinant for bringing about the kind of change we hope to cause in the church at large around the world.

Conclusion

So what are the implications of all this for how we should respond to the endless queries to train cross-culturally? I have not intended to answer that question through this paper. Instead, I have tried to raise some of the issues for our discussion together so that we can collaboratively move toward some answers.

The complexity of the issues involved is part of what God used to confirm His leading for me to add the responsibility for Sonlife's North American youth division to my international responsibilities at Sonlife. I have a new sense of urgency to speak to the broader issues of what it means to "make disciples of all nations" from a North American context. I am convinced that God's unique niche for me in my global passion is to challenge and empower church leaders everywhere to explore the complex issues involved in international multiplication.

Canadian N.K. Clifford (1973) wrote, "The Evangelical Protestant mind has never relished complexity. Indeed its crusading genius, whether in religion or politics, has always tended toward an oversimplification of issues and the substitution of inspiration and zeal for critical analysis and serious reflection" (p. 323). Cross-cultural ministry is complex and is not helped by simplifying it into packaged approaches. I am confident there IS a place for utilizing itinerant equipping as a way to make disciples of global youth. However, we have not yet discovered the most effective way to use itinerant equipping and if done poorly, more damage than good can be done for the Gospel. We need to find ways to fan the flames of excitement that underlie the endless queries we get from alumni who want to train cross-culturally. At the same time, we must use sound missiology and theology as we intentionally multiply internationally. Noll (1994) wrote: "For evangelicalism as a whole, not new graduate schools, but an alteration of attitudes is the key to promoting a Christian life of the mind...The superstructures - appropriate institutions, lively periodicals, adequate funding, academic respect, meaningful influence - are not insignificant... But if evangelicals are ever to have a mind, they must begin with the heart" (p. 249).

The alteration-of-heart attitude is what I long to see come about as a result of my study. The heart of the multiplier is what I am most challenged to see transformed. Christ, Paul, and men and women throughout Church history have multiplied their lives and a passion for Christ through non-residential ministry. We have to keep pushing up against the tensions inherent to multiplying an incarnational approach to ministry from afar. Thanks for thinking with me about how to be better stewards of the opportunities and resources entrusted to us.