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Charting a Course for Missionary Education

After 45 years of training missionaries for the Seventh-day Adventist world church from the campus of Andrews University, the future location, role, and shape of the Institute of World Mission is currently a matter of some discussion. This is a good time, then, to review the changes that have occurred in the training the Institute provides and consider some of the principles that undergird effective missionary education today.

The Task

Since 1966 a major task for the faculty of the Institute of World Mission (IWM) has been designing and implementing training programs, called Mission Institutes, for the missionaries sent by the General Conference. Initially Mission Institutes were six weeks long, held each summer at Andrews University, and attended by missionaries who were, for the most part, North American. Although the number, length, and location of Mission Institutes varied somewhat through the years (Institutes were also held in Loma Linda, Europe, and Australia), most of those attending were from the Western world. Gradually the makeup of the missionary workforce changed and the types of training and the kinds of service the Institute provides has also changed.

Today Mission Institutes are three weeks long, held in three or four locations around the world each year, and attended by a very diverse group of missionaries from many different home countries. In the last dozen years the Institute of World Mission also began Mission Institutes for missionary children, developed reentry seminars for returning missionary families and teens, published a missionary training textbook (*Passport to Mission*) in several languages, produced a quarterly missionary newsletter, prepared training materials for volunteers, and held training events for tentmakers (self-funded missionaries), administrators, and others.

Many factors have contributed to these changes and initiatives. In 1999

the General Conference gave the Institute of World Mission the responsibility of training all Inter-division Employees (IDEs)¹ regardless of home country. The increasingly multi-cultural and multi-linguistic nature of the church and the IDE missionary workforce required rethinking teaching methodologies. A growing awareness of the importance of the missionary spouse and children in missionary success refocused the curriculum. And, the rapid growth in short-term mission and Global Mission initiatives provided opportunities for additional types of missionary training.

Currently the IWM provides Mission Institutes, for which academic credit is offered, taught by missiologists who are faculty at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary. Participants are usually highly educated medical, educational, ministerial, administrative, and development professionals. They are motivated by the cross-cultural challenges they face but appreciative of the academic credit they receive.² The kinds of skills and learning they need require educational approaches and methodologies beyond those found in the traditional classroom yet informed by deep missiological understanding and educational expertise. Missionary education in the 21st century offers an opportunity to utilize educational theory from several different streams of thought. The intercultural training model based upon adult education theory provides a philosophical starting point to help the IWM move toward its goal of making missionary training personally transforming and educationally sound.

Intercultural Training

In the 1960s dissatisfaction with the university model of intercultural education led to the development of the discipline of intercultural training (Kohls 1995:3). The traditional university model of education emphasized a rational, detached, cognitive understanding of the subject. While this kind of knowledge is useful to intercultural workers, it left large areas of expertise untouched. The areas of interpersonal relationships and emotional intelligence were at that time largely ignored in the university curriculum (Harrison and Hopkins 1967:435). As more and more agencies required effective intercultural workers a new educational paradigm called "training" was developed.

¹The term "Interdivision Employee" refers to missionaries sent between world divisions by the General Conference.

²Two hours of academic credit from Andrews University is offered for Mission Institute. Transcripts of Mission Institute credit are requested for use as prerequisites or course credit in degree programs and also for use in a variety of professional certifications and licenses that would not accept Continuing Education Units.

Training is defined as “the master discipline which makes it possible to transfer other disciplines” (Kohls and Brussow 1995:3). Training utilizes many different approaches to teach knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Using adult learning theory, especially as articulated by Malcolm S. Knowles, training focuses on “learning how to learn” largely through experiential methodologies. Training can be personalized, varied as to sequence and type of activities, and shaped to allow for substantial input from the student (4). The focus of the trainer is on the learning process itself—helping participants explore the options and find their own answers. The trainer is central to the training process as a facilitator of learning but at the same time expects and allows the participants to take responsibility for their own learning (Wight 1995:5).

In the late 1980s Gottfried Oosterwal, then director of the Institute of World Mission, described the need for an “experiential approach” in the training of missionaries at Mission Institutes (Oosterwal n.d.:8). Since then, the intercultural training model has increasingly informed Mission Institute methodology, especially with the inauguration of a new curriculum in 2001. Implementing a training model for Mission Institutes requires a complex set of dynamics. Four of those dynamics will be explored in this paper: learning-centered training, critical thinking skills, person formation, and evaluation.

Learning-centered Training

Jane Vella supplies three foundational concepts for adult education that fit well with the training model.

1. “We now speak of a learning-centered approach to education; it puts learning at the center, not teaching, not the teacher, and not even the learner” (Vella 2000:xvi). Traditional academic practice puts teachers and teaching at the center of the educational process—faculty members are urged to become better communicators with more expertise in their fields. More recently the consumer orientation of Western culture has pushed higher education towards a learner-centered focus—decisions are based on what the students want and what they will pay for. Intercultural training, however, must teach the learner how to learn. Missionaries need the ability to learn on the spot, in difficult situations, without external support, making decisions based on the context and their own instincts. Learning, therefore, must be at the center of intercultural training.

2. “A learning task is an open question put to learners who have all the resources they need to respond” (2000:8). By asking open questions, learners are invited to explore possible answers using their previous experience and integrating previous learning. In order not to make missionaries dependent on expert authority and experience, a resource that will not

be present on the field, questions must be posed for which the “expert” does not have the answer. In order for the answers to be meaningful and integrated into the life they must be based upon valid concepts and correct understandings constructed by learners who have thought through the issues for themselves. Only such “constructed” knowing can hold up under the pressure of intercultural living (Vella 2000:44).

3. “A good teacher does not teach all that he knows. He teaches all that the learners need to know at the time and all that the learners can accountably learn in the time given” (11). Since it would be impossible to provide answers for every problem missionaries will encounter in the field, missionary training must instead focus on meta-skills and concepts. Deciding what can reasonably be taught in a given length of time requires leaving out important material. Sequence and flow, timing and integration assume great importance. “Our role as adult educators is not to ‘cover’ a set of content, but to design and teach for accountable learning” (82).

Accountable learning for the mission task requires a clear focus on the objectives of the training and sufficient time to create an environment to meet those objectives. While training can become more efficient through skilled teaching and sound educational practices, thus shortening the time spent, many large mission and humanitarian organizations expect cross-cultural workers to spend several months in training.³ Over the years, Mission Institutes have been held for as short as two weeks and as long as six weeks. Currently Mission Institutes last three weeks and have the goal of developing missionaries who are (1) Growing Spiritually, (2) Thinking Biblically, (3) Reasoning Missiologically, (4) Living Wholistically, and (5) Serving Incarnationally. These are the five formal objectives structuring the Mission Institute curriculum. Growing Spiritually explores the missionary call, family transition, peace in the storm, the mystery of suffering, accepting God’s grace and other topics relevant to missionary spiritual life. Thinking Biblically includes mission in the Bible, the mission of the Adventist Church, studying the Bible for mission, Holy Spirit and mission, and the uniqueness of Christianity and Adventism. Reasoning Mis-

³YWAM—three to five months of training for one to two years of service, www.ywam.org; Peace Corps—three months of training for one year of service, www.peacecorps.org; Southern Baptist International Mission Board—twenty to thirty hours of graduate level courses for career missionaries plus a 36 month apprenticeship, www.going.imb.org; The Mission Society (formerly United Methodist Mission Board)—three months for career missionaries, www.themissionsociety.org; Adventist Frontier Missions—twelve weeks of training for career missionaries and four weeks for student missionaries; 1000 Missionary Movement—three to twelve months of training for one to three years of service.

siologically provides an overview of culture, values, worldview, and culture shock. *Living Wholistically* deals with the missionary family, third culture kids, personality types, physical and mental health, and living a balanced life. *Serving Incarnationally* applies the preceding learning to incarnational living, cross-cultural communication, witnessing, conflict resolution, critical and practical contextualization, roles and relationships, and multi-cultural team building.

To create an atmosphere for accountable learning in all five areas—when Mission Institutes are held in several different countries, attended by families with children, who arrive jetlagged from many parts of the world, each with different needs, life experiences, and expectations—is a delicate and creative task. Fundamental requirements include a reasonably safe and comfortable living environment, well-planned and nurturing children’s institutes, and a warm, inclusive emotional atmosphere. Substantial time is required for spirits to revive, families to adjust, and the group to bond so that assimilation, reflection, and integration of new concepts and attitudes can occur. Faculty need not only teaching ability, but also the interpersonal skills, organizational aptitude, personal flexibility, and willingness to work hard to create a learning environment that models and empowers missionaries to become innovative learners. Unlike maintenance learning that focuses on the rules, procedures, and standard skills of a stable society, “innovative learning results in changes in the way individuals act and ultimately change in culture” (Jarvis 2008:20). For innovative learning to occur, critical thinking skills are needed.

Critical Thinking Skills

The ability to think critically about personal attitudes and behaviors is an essential skill that needs to be developed during missionary training. Stephen Brookfield believes that critical thinking “involves calling into question the assumptions underlying our customary, habitual ways of thinking and acting and then being ready to think and act differently on the basis of this critical questioning” (Brookfield 1987:1). However, as Brookfield points out, any attempt to force people to think critically about their underlying assumptions will only result in resistance. Critical thinking must be awakened and encouraged “without making people feel threatened or patronized” (11). Facilitating critical thinking is not easy but would include the following four steps: (1) affirming the thinker’s self worth, (2) listening attentively to their contributions, (3) supporting their efforts to develop new concepts, and (4) reflecting back to them their habitual ways of thinking and acting (1987:72-75).

Utilizing educational methodology that encourages learner participation in an open and supportive environment best accommodates the

development of critical thinking. When learners are encouraged to work cooperatively on learning tasks, struggle with real dilemmas through case studies and simulation games, and share their insights with the group, critical thinking skills are encouraged. Facilitating critical thinking is not just a matter of posing problems and letting participants wrestle with them. Facilitators must assist participants in developing realistic goals that are compatible with their own values (Brookfield 1987:121) and, in missionary education, based on biblical principles.

IWM faculty have learned that creating a dialogical community where deeply held cultural assumptions are questioned, personal behaviors evaluated, and cross-cultural understanding and skills grow requires more knowledge and expertise from the teacher than are required to prepare a good lecture. Faculty must model open, accepting attitudes, the capacity to question without cynicism, skill in using missiological and biblical principles to guide the discussion, and the ability to respond appropriately no matter what a participant does or says. As creatures of culture, missionaries and missionary teachers have to learn to critically evaluate their own attitudes and assumptions before they can approach another culture to impact it for Christ. "We are the result of our learning and so, in an over-simplified form, is our society" (Jarvis 2008:33). If Christian mission is to impact society, missionaries need an intercultural training program structured for accountable learning where critical thinking skills and biblically-informed dialog open them to personal formation.

Person Formation

Missionary education involves more than teaching and learning in the usual sense of the word. Missionary education also provides an opportunity to mediate spiritual and emotional healing to people who will be stretched in ways they cannot foresee. Moving internationally is an emotionally intense experience that often leads to anxiety, uncertainty, and a lowered self-image (Paige 1991:2). Prospective missionaries need to prepare well so that they can successfully negotiate the stresses they will encounter. Missionary training can lead them to identify areas in which they need growth or healing and then teach them how to find that healing (Cheng 2001:126). "When missionaries undergo cross-cultural stress, they are most vulnerable in their social and psychological aspects" (127). Past traumas, family of origin issues, and certain personality traits often increase personal stress during the intercultural experience.

Critical thinking skills need to be brought to bear upon personal issues and accountable learning occur in the psychological and spiritual realms so that missionaries can integrate their past experiences into a healthy perspective that will allow them to minister effectively in the intercultural

setting. Several methodologies that seek to foster such person formation and inner healing are used at Mission Institutes. They include sharing personal stories to gain perspective on life experiences, building relationships across cultural barriers through shared learning tasks, growing spiritually by studying the Bible, praying, and worshiping together, developing peer mentoring relationships with other missionaries, and counseling with a skilled missionary psychologist.

Missionary education endeavors to empower ordinary Christians to carry the treasure of God's Good News in earthen vessels. This self-transcendent task increases the need to become an innovative learner, think critically about one's assumptions and behaviors, and grow in loving relationship with God and community, in other words, to become wise. "Wisdom is best characterized as an integration of cognitive, reflective, and affective personality qualities" (Ardelt and Jacobs 2009:734). Missionary training can facilitate that whole person integration through structuring for accountable learning, modeling and enabling critical discourse within community, seeking to form wise, healthy, spiritual people, and evaluating for perspective transformation.

Evaluation

Jack Mezirow, in his book *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*, lists seven ideal conditions for participants involved in critical discourse:

- Have accurate and complete information
- Are free from coercion and self-deception
- Have the ability to weigh evidence and evaluate arguments
- Have the ability to be critically reflective
- Are open to alternative perspectives
- Have equality of opportunity to participate, and
- Will accept an informed, objective, and rational consensus as a legitimate test of validity. (Mezirow 1991:198)

Mezirow believes these conditions provide the criteria by which adult educational programs can be evaluated. Educational programs are either supporting or reducing the growth of these ideal conditions in their educational process (199).

If perspective transformation, as Mezirow asserts, does not occur on demand (202) and if perspective transformation is a goal of missionary education then the entire curriculum must be flexible and responsive to the continual evaluation of the learning conditions. Keeping the ideal conditions in mind and constantly assessing progress toward them will help to maintain the focus of both facilitators and participants and provide an

opportunity for transformational learning to occur. Actual evaluation of whether or not transformational learning has occurred can be difficult (Mezirow 1991:220). Journaling, response to hypothetical dilemmas, and quality of reflective discourse may be used to ascertain degree of perspective transformation. Action to implement insights is critically important. Action plans developed by participants that are evaluated and then supported by the group opens another window to assess transformational learning.

The personal and professional growth of the adult educator is a prerequisite for effective facilitating. Mezirow and associates suggest a number of attributes needed by adult educators.

“The educator is an empathic provocateur and role model, a collaborative learner who is critically self-reflective and encourages others to consider alternative perspectives, and a guide who sets and enforces the norms governing rational discourse and encourages the solidarity and group support that is necessary when learners become threatened because comfortably established beliefs and values have been challenged” (Mezirow 1991:206). Since the ideal conditions for critical discourse are rarely met, facilitators require an ability to counter inequalities in the learning environment. Assuring equal opportunity for all to participate, allowing alternative arguments, maintaining focus on the issue at hand, defusing biases, identifying assumptions, and working for consensus are all the responsibility of the facilitator (207).

As the faculty of the Institute of World Mission continues to adapt the philosophical ideals and training methodology of adult education to the training of Seventh-day Adventist missionaries, critical appraisal of the educational assumptions underlying Mission Institutes must be ongoing. Evaluation of the educational expertise of the faculty and the quality of learning offered should inform institutional planning and strategic decisions. Such evaluation can enable the IWM team to learn from the successes and failures of the past and more clearly plan for the joys and challenges of the path ahead.

Application

How does a team develop the ability to create a learning-centered environment that fosters critical thinking skills, person formation, and ongoing evaluation? In the last dozen years, the IWM team has worked toward these goals by strategic planning, team building, formal, and informal evaluation processes.

Beginning in 2001 the IWM team has periodically spent several days together developing a strategic vision and plan for the team. A shared vision, with measurable steps to implement that vision, focuses team efforts

and helps to create the harmony needed for smooth functioning. Strategic planning sessions must give equal voice to all team members, beginning with a SWOT⁴ analysis and continuing through the setting of goals and development of action plans to implement the goals. Such team effort provides team members with the opportunity to practice the critical discourse skills they teach. In September 2010 the IWM team created a mission statement that aims to reflect the mandate of the Institute of World Mission: "In anticipation of Jesus' soon return our purpose is to cultivate mission vision, prepare cross-cultural workers, and nurture missionary witness for effective service in God's harvest."

Weekly team meetings, where discussion of every facet of IWM business can openly occur and Institute activities are measured against team vision and goals, increases team cohesion and accountability. In addition, engaging in specific team building exercises and frequent social activities aids the bonding and trust that enables the team to better model attitudes of acceptance, love, and unity so foundational for effective missionary education and life.

Keeping learning at the center is important, not just during Mission Institutes, but also to enhance team expertise and create personal accountability. Maintaining the requirements for academic rank, attending professional meetings, researching and writing on mission issues, and ongoing interaction with missiologists and theologians enhances faculty learning and their ability to create a learning environment at Mission Institutes. The attitude of a learner is also essential for evaluation to make a meaningful difference. Although formal evaluation forms are filled out by Institute participants and reviewed by the team, unless team members adopt a learning attitude little real change occurs. The ability to learn also makes informal feedback from team members and others a valuable tool for personal growth and perspective transformation.

Conclusion

Mission Institutes remain a core component of the missionary education provided by the Institute of World Mission. Curriculum adjustments occurred throughout the 45 years of Mission Institutes with an increasing emphasis on implementing adult educational models that resulted in a major change in teaching methodology and focus in 2001. Adopting a training model of intercultural education reinforces the prerequisite of both formal missiological education (cognitive knowledge) and substantial personal mission experience (experiential knowledge) to be a credible

⁴SWOT—Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats

and able facilitator of missionary learning. Mission Institutes need to keep deep missiological learning at the center of training, develop participants' critical thinking skills within a safe environment, focus on the personal formation of each participant, and implement on-going evaluation in the endeavor to provide training that leads to the perspective transformation needed for positive cross-cultural living and witnessing. By incorporating these teaching goals into team life, the Institute of World Mission team seeks to authentically model what Mission Institutes endeavor to teach—the importance of a shared vision and cohesive team that thinks critically about their task and works diligently to fulfill their role in God's mission.

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