Ministerial Training for Seminarians at Northeast Brazil College

By Emílio Abdala

Every year from September to November, close to seventy new churches are planted in the Northeast Brazil Union by Northeast Brazil College (NBC) seminarians. In 2008 during the seminarians’ ministerial training, 2,200 new members were brought to repentance and faith in Christ and joined a local church as responsible members. This article describes the ministerial training at NBC and provides a four-stage training model to show how a church planting program can be integrated into the regular course requirements.

Training for religious vocation is an educational process in which an experienced coach-teacher seeks to inspire and equip a student-mentoree in a given setting of ministry with motivation, perspective, and skills to effect changes so the student can become a minister and competent to do the work of ministry. Theological education, like many other educational programs, has four distinct aspects: the classroom with academic instruction, the library with supplementary study, field experience with its practical aspects, and informal discussion and personal reflection (Wilson 1957:3).

As long ago as 1929, the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists mandated an internship plan that was to follow a student’s basic ministerial training (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 1929). This would agree with what Ellen White said about young pastors associating with older, experienced ministers (White 1948:101, 102). The Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Ministerial and Theological Education reiterates the need for an internship (2001:40, 41). At Northeast Brazil College the chosen approach to train ministerial students is...
in the form of intensive mentoring with a coach. Coaching is a relational process in which a mentor, who knows how to do something well, imparts those skills to a mentoree who wants to learn them (Stanley and Clinton 1992:79). The emphasis is on imparting skills and confidence in the use of the skills taught, motivating students so as to bring out the best in them, stretching them beyond what they thought they were capable of doing, observing the mentorees in action, evaluating their experience, and giving feedback to enhance self-learning and development (Stanley and Clinton 1992:82).

There are two major periods during a seminarian’s formal theological training when the field dimension of that educational experience is incorporated into the student’s total curriculum. The first period is during the academic year itself while the students are in residence at the school from February to May. This is normally referred to as concurrent field education (Hornecker 1995:24, 25). The second period occurs from September to November when the students are away from the normal routines of school life and are coached by the supervising teacher in a church planting project. This has been called block placement (Hornecker 1995:24, 25).

Placement for concurrent field education is usually to a large variety of sites around the campus such as churches, schools, and community areas which provide opportunities for ministerial training. The normal time commitment for seminarians engaged in concurrent field education is twelve to fifteen hours each week or, in some special cases, eighteen to twenty-five hours each week. At NBC, the field experience works as a graded process. In the first year seminarians participate in the different elements of a worship service, gaining experience in speaking before a Sabbath School class and giving Bible studies for young people on the campus. The second year provides experience as an assistant to a pastor with the students supervising a department in the church, working with young people in the church programs, and leading small groups. The third year students gain experience in preaching, public evangelism, and church planting. The last year provides an opportunity for students to make independent decisions, help with lay training and mobilization, and work to resolve specific problems in a church.

Block placement provides third year seminarians an intensive full-time ministry within a specific block of time apart from the normal routine of the school year. This occurs in large cities where students are divided into districts and assigned as evangelists under the coaching of a supervisor. This training is designed to produce the church planters of tomorrow—people who will be comfortable and competent ministering outside
the structures of a local church (Gibbs 2000:118). The assumption is that students may well find themselves in a position where there is no job open to them in an existing district. Therefore, they will have to be ready to plant a new church in a specific target area.

The duration of the employment is for six months with the Northeast Union Mission providing all the evangelistic materials and supplies (Bibles, literature, handbills, etc.), a travel budget for the supervision of the seminary coach, and with the local conferences providing the finances for hiring seminarians as beginning church planters. The plan also stipulates that each ministerial intern should be associated with an experienced Bible worker who is hired by the local conference to participate in the church planting project. Local churches are responsible for feeding and lodging students in places within a reasonable distance from their field of action. It is also imperative to provide possibilities for privacy for the team members since they will need to study and pray alone and have some private time for themselves each day.

Field Site Selection

Block placement is related to the detachment of the student from the college campus to the field site where they will be immersed in the reality of ministry. Communication and cooperation with any Adventist organization operating in the selected area are indispensable. NBC does not enter any field without the approval of the local church administration because the conference provides the financial resources and support for all follow-up work. Often the prospective evangelist has a preference for working in his home area or for a certain people group. This is understandable and has the advantage that the student then takes up the task with interest and enthusiasm. Each year seven bands of ten students are sent to seven conferences to plant seventy new churches. The criteria used to select each site take into account the following characteristics:

1. A setting where people are in crisis and/or experiencing change, with priority given to unreached areas, urban areas, and receptive areas (Hunter 1977:8). The best place to plant
a new church is in a city with a population of at least 100,000 or in a suburb of a large city.

2. A setting where appropriate resources are available in terms of finances from the local administration and people who value and are open to working with ministerial candidates. It is also important for students to feel the dignity, pressure, and expectations which come with remuneration. Financial reward is a concrete way to signal to students the significance of the task they are doing.

3. A setting where the supervisor’s work is fully integrated with the structure of the local field. Only a supervisor with administrative authority, who works with local leaders, and who already bears heavy responsibility within the local field can facilitate meaningful supervision (Klink 1966:211).

4. A setting where significant tasks for seminarians are provided. The students must perceive the task assignment as vital to the work of the local field where the services are being provided. The setting should provide students with decision-making roles rather than making them errand runners (McCarty 1979:62). Unless students have significant roles, supervisors will not be able to see how students handle the pressures of decision making.

5. A setting located within three to seven miles from a “mother church” with a membership of 100 to 200 that is chosen to sponsor the new church. Proximity promotes both growth and competition which is not a problem for either the new church or the mother church.

Development of the Model

The model chosen to accomplish the coaching process among the third year seminarians of NBC follows the four training phases and six teaching steps of Christ, as presented by Bill Hull (1988:214):

1. Tell them what, tell them why
2. Show them how, do it with them
3. Let them do it
4. Deploy them

The four training phases focus on two essentials—time and level of commitment, while the six-step teaching method focuses on training and levels of responsibility (Hull 1988:214). This approach means that all four phases fall into two major periods during formal training—the concurrent and the block placement periods. These four stages of training take one year with the process of action and reflection taking place in the context of the classroom and in the field setting.

Phase 1: Tell Them What and Tell Them Why

The objective of this first phase is to provide a model of Christian education for mission and evangelism that is to be reproduced in the local church by future pastors. As mentioned
before, in the third year of the seminarians’ academic formation, supervised apprenticeship promotes an experience in preaching, public evangelism, and church planting. The normal curriculum for the first semester of this year of the NBC program contains a course in Evangelism and Church Growth (12 units) which includes general concepts in mission, discipleship, and church planting. During the first five months of this year my task as a teacher is to build conviction concerning the right process and the right philosophy needed to fulfill mission. In order to create a winning environment I foster spiritual preparation by maximizing the central place of the Holy Spirit in the mission of the church and by emphasizing the necessity for every student to be filled and led by the Spirit.

During this introductory stage students talk through the planning procedures and are introduced to the evangelistic strategy. They also coordinate demographic surveys of their areas in the small cities around NBC. Then the members of each unit collaborate in the development of a master plan for their target area. Each member of a unit concentrates on two or three important aspects of each phase, and the teacher circulates among the groups to answer pertinent questions and to keep the discussion moving along desired lines.

At the end of the process each unit circulates rough drafts and reports the main outlines of its strategy for that phase of the program. Class members offer critiques and suggestions to be considered in the finalization of the various master plans. At the end of the term the units circulate completed master plans and are ready for the most important implementation part that takes place in the surrounding areas. Phase 1 takes time to allow all the instructions to become firmly established and assimilated. Time is also needed for review and rehearsal before students are sent on to Phase 2.

**Phase 2: Show Them How and Do It with Them**

It is important to note that Phase 2 parallels Phase 1 and takes place during the first semester of the third academic year. At this stage, however, students work in a controlled environment where they can gain experience and practice with the teacher to fully understand the interrelated parts of the overall strategy. They also need to master the dynamics of persuasive evangelism and learn how to use the evangelistic tools available.

The small units that developed the master plan for their target area are now immersed in a ministry with a particular people group in a specific community near the campus. During this concurrent field phase the students are encouraged by the pressures of time, circumstances, and supervision to integrate their experiences from the classroom and the field, to
pay serious attention to spiritual formation, and to be engaged in the excitement, demands, and opportunities which ministry affords.

The plan for this on-the-job training provides one special week for the teacher/coach to conduct an evangelistic meeting where all the students can watch and have the opportunity to ask questions. This week is generally followed by an intensive series of twenty-one meetings directed by small units of two to three students in ministry teams, thus providing a balance between doing ministry and reflecting upon that experience in the classroom.

Supervisory time is scheduled for the students and the teacher/coach to engage in systematic, disciplined reflection upon the ministry they are involved in. This on-the-job training is added to the classroom training. Through this process students take theological ideas out to their supervised ministry settings and bring back to the classroom their ministry experiences to examine for theological content.

This phase also encourages the ministry teams to have a clear vision of their mission to which they all contribute their skills, gifts, and resources to move toward achieving their ministry goal.

**Phase 3: Let Them Do It**

As mentioned earlier, the block placement model engages students in an intensive, full-time ministry apart from the routine of the school year. However, before they are assigned to a specific place for a supervised city mission (September to December), students need time to have all the instructions firmly established and they also need some assimilation time for review and rehearsal before they are sent to Phase 3. Therefore, seminarians enroll for an intensive course beginning in August (second semester). The Public Evangelism course (8 units) concentrates on strategy development for church-extension evangelism in designated areas. Special emphasis is placed on understanding the Great Commission by balancing the disciple-making process with effective methods of evangelism. Discipleship as the end-product of evangelism and the importance of multiplying disciples to
accomplish world evangelization is also emphasized.

Then, from September to December of the same year, I take all seventy students to the principal cities of Northeast Brazil where they have a supervised field experience in evangelism and church planting. The process used for the church planting experience is based on a five-step model developed at NBC and modified over time: Planning, Preparation, Pioneer, Proclamation, and Post Evangelism.

Planning: The logistics of starting the block placement programs is not left to chance. Every effort is made to match the students with a place that fits their abilities and gifts. As mentioned above the field site is selected according to specific criteria. Months before the beginning of the evangelistic meetings a survey is conducted that seeks to discover the average income, the employment rates, the needs of the city, and the places where people are in transition. The visits to the cities and the surveys seek to help the teams gather information about important services or ministries that need to be performed in the community. The teacher/coach also meets local lay leaders, finds the meeting places, locates proper accommodations for the students, and develops—along with the help of the local leadership and the conference evangelists—a preliminary plan.

Preparation: The next stage is related to the preparation of the local churches with the aim to strengthen their spiritual motivation and sense of mission. This stage also includes member enrichment to help them discover and utilize their spiritual gifts in the setting of small groups.

Pioneer: In the pioneer stage, the efforts to start the new church include a mix of small group ministries and a sequence of felt-need seminars in the community that includes health and family life topics. These ministries enable the core members to reach out and begin to make contacts in the community and to also create good will and a good name for the new church being planned. Small groups not only provide an excellent way to test the level of receptivity of the specific area before attempting to plant a new church, but also provide a nice follow-up after the meetings are over. Few people who join a group apostatize—so involvement in group life is essential for new believers. Other more traditional approaches may be used during this time, such as personal Bible studies.

Proclamation: In the proclamation stage, the traditional Adventist method has been a public evangelistic event. Therefore, in order to bring the cultivated interests into the new Adventist church, a definite plan for disciple making is produced by the seminarians. A pre-baptismal class in this discipling phase emphasizes the basics of salvation and the essential doctrines of Christianity. This stage models
a decentralization of ministry, which gives each person involved fulfillment and a life of purpose. By decentralization I mean multiplicity of smaller efforts. I hold that the young intern evangelist who can go into a new area or town where there are no members and raise up a new church of twenty to twenty-five, is holding an effort which is just as successful in its sphere as that of the big time city evangelist who brings in a hundred from a city effort where there is a large church. In this approach, more than one effort is conducted by the same team, with each seminarian in charge of his/her own series of meetings. Different campaigns are held at a reasonable distance from where they are staying together. They follow the same program with the same subjects for their public presentations. Involvement gives the trainees a strong sense of accomplishment. They are provided with the opportunity to prove themselves, to be productive, and to demonstrate disciple making and leadership techniques.

Post-Evangelism: Finally, the follow-up stage includes small groups, one-to-one mentoring, training seminars, and involvement in tasks and roles, with a continuous monitoring of the new members’ assimilation into the church. It is crucial in this mentor-student relationship to be as clear as possible about goals and expectations at the very beginning and throughout the process. The criteria of evaluation are the student’s skills, personhood, and performance. Students are expected to plant a new church and start a disciple-making process with new members.

**Phase 4: Reproduction**

Graduation is a time of celebration when a well-trained group of ministerial students are deployed to begin their ministry as disciple-making pastors in new places. They leave physically but some of them continue to keep in contact as occasional mentorees with their teacher.

**NBC Coach/Teacher Role**

The experience of a teacher/coach mentor is a two-way learning event where the students’ experience counts for as much as the teacher’s knowledge. Sometimes it is difficult to
discover who is learning more, the teacher or the student, because through the evaluation of the various mission project insights are revealed which help develop new approaches and methodologies.

McCarty affirms that coaching seminarians requires an endless number of skills. The coach needs all the skills of an evangelist, a congregational minister, a theology professor, and a counselor, as well as specific skills in supervision methodology (McCarty 1979:29). Competency in pastoral-evangelistic ministry by a currently practicing professional is extremely important. Besides those ministry skills, the teacher also needs good academic training in order to help students understand the theoretical base from which they will be operating and the theological/missiological implications of what they are doing (McCarty 1979:29).

Coaches need to have relational skills which will enable them to interact appropriately with students, pastors, and local church administrators, because an atmosphere of trust is indispensable for learning (Hunter 1977:23-29). Coaches must have no “absentee supervisor,” for the coach represents the college, the church organization, and also the students.

Too often seminaries use students rather than train them. The most important role of a teacher/coach is to help students achieve personal and professional identity, to develop the disciplines of scheduling, planning, finance, and a devotional life, and to examine their ministry to see how they are doing and whether they are meeting expectations. A coach is not a passive individual who stands by and watches stu-

The experience of a teacher mentor is a two-way learning event, where the students’ experience counts for as much as the teacher’s knowledge.
students do as they please. Nor should coaches be so inflexible that they demand that students always do whatever they say.

**Conclusion**

Theological field education is no more important than the biblical, historical, or ethical studies of a seminary curriculum, and no less important than studying the Pentateuch and the Synoptic Gospels. The importance of the internship program is to bridge the gap between the biblical, theological, and practical courses and their application to the living situation and the programs of the church.

Seventh-day Adventism was born and grew as a church planting movement. In a church multiplication movement, leadership development strategies need to utilize reproducible methods that are integrated with the evangelism process. A primary goal of a leadership farm system is the production of quality pastors, church planters, and missionaries who can multiply themselves through an equipping process. I see the implementation of these guidelines as instrumental in developing a practical, supervisory model that will lay a good foundation to equip students for apostolic ministry in pioneer situations. Starting and multiplying new churches through the development of reproducing leaders is the only way to fully obey Jesus’ command to make disciples.

**Works Cited**


International Board of Ministerial and Theological Education. 2001. *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist ministerial and theological education*. Silver Spring, MD: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.


